

MORE
THAN
JUST

THE TALK

BECOMING YOUR KIDS'
GO-TO PERSON ABOUT



JONATHAN MCKEE



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of those whose stories appear in this book.

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Unanswered Questions

“How do we know hooking up is really wrong, and even if it is . . . can’t I just get forgiveness afterward?”

That was her first question of many, verbatim. She wasn’t very articulate, but there was no misunderstanding what this young lady was really asking.

She was sixteen years old going on twenty, wearing tiny little booty shorts and a low-cut blouse exposing the top of her bra and way too much cleavage. She had hugged every guy who entered the room that evening—including adult leaders, with an embrace just a little too long to be comfortable.

Just another night at church youth group.

After twenty years of youth ministry I wish I could tell you this was an isolated incident. Sadly, this scene was all too familiar.

I met her and her friends last September when I spoke to this particular group. A handful of teenagers approached me afterward with questions. She was the second one to talk with me.

I had seen her playing pool with her friends before I spoke. She was the exact same age as my youngest daughter, a frightening thought. In the thirty minutes I observed, I heard her mention a sexually charged TV show and a popular sexually explicit music

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video that was currently number one on the charts, and watched her make gestures with a pool cue that would have made her mother pass out.

Funny thing . . . she really didn't stick out in this crowd of church kids. The two other girls standing around the pool table were dressed the same way and engaging in similar conversation—that is . . . when they actually talked. Today's conversation between teenagers seems to be only a few sentences at a time, broken with long pauses to check their phones, type something quickly, then resume paying attention to the less important audience . . . *the people in the same room with them.*

A few young men lurked nearby, one with headphones around his neck, another leaning close and sharing an earbud with a girl standing next to him. I didn't hear every song or artist they played, but in the short time I was there, I heard three sexually explicit songs I recognized from the top of the music charts.

I asked the youth pastor a little about these particular teenagers. The sixteen-year-old girl was an elder's daughter, and the young man listening to explicit music was the pastor's son.

Cliché? Maybe. But sadly, a true story.

I wish I could tell you this was a snapshot of today's young people in general, but it's not. It's an accurate picture of today's church kids. If you want to see today's young people, go to a school rally or chaperone a homecoming dance. Scarier yet, find an opportunity to be a fly on the wall when a teenager is traversing virtual hangouts like Tinder or Omegle (both social media sites parents don't want to discover their kids navigating). You'll quickly discover that the antics I saw around the pool table that night were more *Sesame Street* compared to a lot of what's out there.

Sadly, a great chasm is growing between parents and their kids. Most parents have no idea what their kids are downloading and watching, or the kind of conversations they are engaging in each day. Young people stealthily float under the radar, taking full advantage of this disconnect. As a result, the people who abound in misinformation are the ones filling our kids' ears constantly, and the people who know the truth often only engage in mere minutes of healthy conversation each week.

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No wonder the Centers for Disease Control has reported that 64.1 percent of seniors in high school have already had sex.¹

If only someone had told them the explicit truth.

Yes, I realize most parents have attempted “the sex talk” at least once, usually when the school is about to teach sex ed or the neighbor girl gets pregnant.

Pause for a moment and reflect honestly. When did you last talk openly and candidly about sex with your kids? Do you think you answered all their questions? What about the embarrassing questions they were too afraid to ask?

Is oral sex okay since it's not really “sex”?

Why would God make something as good as sex and then just ban it from us?

Is it okay to masturbate if I think about my future spouse when I'm doing it?

How far can I actually go with my boyfriend/girlfriend?

Is living together okay? Isn't marriage a little outdated?

What about same-sex relationships? Since when does God deny any kind of true love?

Have your own kids asked you any of these questions?

Yeah . . . I didn't have the guts to ask my parents many of these questions either.

But in my last two decades of hanging out with teenagers, I've been asked every one of these questions countless times by young people.

A Trail of Hurt

Let me be the first to tell you that my past isn't close to perfect in the area of sex and dating. I left a trail of hurt behind me in high school and college. I still look back in regret for some of the things I did—the consequences are still there.

I wish I had known the truth.

I'm not making excuses; I sincerely wish someone would have told me the whole truth about sex when I was a teenager. Oh,

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sure, my parents told me all about the birds and the bees when I was growing up. And my dad would have probably answered my questions . . . *had I asked him.*

Did you ask your mom or dad?

Exactly.

So questions remained.

Sure, I took sex education in school. We learned all about the sperm swimming down the birth canal and fighting other sperm to get to that egg. The teacher (I believe he was also the driving instructor) taught us the official names of all the body parts. I was always just wishing he would show more pictures.

We learned about all those diseases—STDs. We saw pictures of open sores like chancres and venereal warts (not quite what I had in mind for pictures). Then I remember hearing about a few infections that could live on a toilet seat for up to two hours (remember those scare tactics?). You can bet that I was making some jumbo toilet-paper nests in public bathrooms after that. But my questions were far from answered.

At church, I remember my youth pastor talking about sex. He said sex was wrong before marriage and he always used that word I hated . . . *petting*. I don't like using a word to describe something sexual that also describes what I do to my dog. And frankly, when adults used irrelevant words from a different era, it only seemed to perpetuate what I already believed: *These adults don't understand my world.*

So . . . questions remained.

No one ever explained to me exactly what the Bible said about sex. I was pretty sure that it was wrong before marriage, but I couldn't really name the verse—and besides, it was just talking about intercourse, right? So I could do everything else? Second and third base were fair game . . . right?

I wanted answers.

Or did I?

I read about sex in every article, book, or magazine I could get my hands on looking for answers. Was I just curious? I can honestly say I wanted to know the truth, but at the same time, I was pretty happy rounding the bases as long as I avoided home plate.

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I knew in my heart this was wrong, but no one dared to reveal the explicit details about God’s design for sex, even though the Bible was full of explicit details.

As I look back on my life, I have no greater regrets than how I behaved sexually before I was married. If I could change one thing about my past, I would remain sexually pure before marriage.

The blame rests on me, but I really wish someone would have clearly communicated three facts I never understood:

1. Sex is good, and God gave it to us to enjoy. It’s not bad or evil; it’s not something to be ashamed of; it’s an amazing gift given for you to enjoy with someone you don’t intend to ever leave . . . *your spouse*. It’s better than any hookup you can imagine.
2. This amazing gift of sexual intimacy is more than just “going all the way.” It’s a passionate journey that begins with intimate touch, peaks when two people have sexual intercourse, and includes everything in between.
3. Pornography and sexually charged entertainment media provoke lust, and lusting is just like committing adultery against our spouse someday. We need to flee any temptations that cause us to lust or engage in sexual immorality.

I wish I had known these things to be true, but I didn’t. Sure, I had heard pieces of these truths, but no one ever told me in a language I could understand. Nobody answered all my questions.

If only someone had been bold enough to tell me *the explicit truth*.

The Explicit Truth

Fast-forward to today, and the situation is far scarier. Today, the world abounds in explicit lies. Teenagers have easy access to copious amounts of misinformation emanating from every screen and each circle of friends they encounter. This is frightening for me as a parent of three.

Where can they hear the truth?

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Who is going to answer their questions? MTV? YouTube? Ask.fm?

The fact is, I had questions when I was in high school, in a world where 1 in 18 teenagers in America had a sexually transmitted disease.²

Now 1 in 4 American teenage girls has an STD,³ the two biggest being HPV and chlamydia. HPV is not only the number one sexually transmitted infection in the United States, it is the number one cause for cervical cancer in women.⁴ Chlamydia is virtually asymptomatic, so it often stays under the radar and spreads from person to person without their knowledge. If undetected, this STD often leads to pelvic inflammatory disease, a known cause for infertility in women.⁵

Do you think this is information our kids should know about? Who is going to tell our kids *the truth*?



WARNING:

The purpose of this book is to help parents explain the *explicit truth* in a world full of explicit lies. Sadly, when you and your children walk into the grocery store or big-box store this week, you'll probably hear some of those lies leaking through the speakers and see them poking out of the magazine racks to your right and left at the checkout counter. In fact, unless you literally lock your kids in the basement, never to leave the house (which I don't recommend, by the way), they will be exposed to sexually charged media messages . . . and these messages aren't typically recommending "*Wait until marriage for sex.*"

In this book, especially in the initial chapters, I'm going to be giving you a peek at some of the common messages our kids hear. And let me warn you, when you read some of the lyrics and hear some of the lies so commonplace in today's world, some of you are going to be offended. And if you are offended . . . *good!* You should be offended. Because these are the lies our world offers in abundance.

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So keep reading, because this book doesn't focus on the lies. In fact, the majority of the book focuses on the truth.

Let's start by taking note of some of the loud voices our kids are hearing day to day.

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1

The Loud Voices

“Of course you should do it.”

“I’m just gonna move my family to Amish Pennsylvania!”

I had heard it countless times from parents tired of the infiltration of raunchy messages from entertainment media. Was Pennsylvania’s Lancaster County truly a Utopia paved with purity and innocence?

One day I received a call from a church in Lancaster County. “Can you please come speak to our church about parenting this smartphone generation?” For about thirty minutes I talked with the leaders from this very conservative Mennonite Brethren church. I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation. They were biblically solid and culturally aware, but apparently they were experiencing struggles very similar to what parents were experiencing all across the U.S.

A few months later I flew across the country from my home in California to Amish Pennsylvania to finally see this perceived mecca of virtue and incorruptibility with my own two eyes. I’ll never forget the drive from my hotel to the church in my small rental car. Within minutes I was following a buggy along the smooth paved road.

Soon, I was in line behind three horse-drawn buggies. (I snapped a quick pic and sent it to my kids back home.)

Eventually I arrived at the church. I wore a jacket and tie that particular morning, despite the American church’s growing trend toward jeans and a polo. As much as I liked to dress casual, this was the East Coast, and this church was ultra conservative. My hunch was correct. The first three teenagers I encountered were dressed in either slacks and a tie or a dress. The men were in suits. A few women actually wore head covers.

As I watched my audience arrive, I began to wonder about the sermon I had planned for the morning service. I was going to preach about Acts 17, sharing how the apostle Paul used the culture around him to springboard conversations about the Gospel with the people of Athens.

I quickly checked in with the church leaders who had brought me out. “Are you sure you want me to talk about today’s culture?” I leaned in really close, thinking out loud. “That lady in the third row has a doily on her head.”

They chuckled. “Yeah, our church is pretty conservative, but they are experiencing most of the struggles you have been talking about in your parenting articles and your blog recently. So please, give it to them. Tell them the unedited truth.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “All right.”

I was impressed. Often, churches have a false sense of security and think, *Not our kids*. This church seemed to realize how susceptible they were to the world’s influence.

As I began speaking to the conservative congregation, I showed them the top ten songs young people were listening to across the country. The number one song on the charts that day opened with the lyrics, “Wakin’ up in the mornin’, two hoes layin’ next to me.”¹

I glanced at the lady in the third row with the head cover. Her eyes had grown as big as saucers.

I spent the next thirty minutes giving the church an accurate peek through the porthole of youth culture, and then proposed we follow the apostle Paul’s example of interacting about the culture instead of overreacting to it. The church was responsive as a whole,

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but my eyes kept wandering over to the lady in the third row. She looked . . . *angry*.

After I finished speaking, sure enough, she walked right up to me with a scowl on her face. I thought, *Oh boy. Here goes!*

The first words out of her mouth shocked me. She simply said, “Thank you.”

My thoughts were, *You’re welcome . . . but please tell that to your face.*

Before I had a chance to respond, she went on. “My kids hear that music all the time.”

I was truly surprised. “Really? Here in Lancaster County?”

“Yes. Whodathunkit,” she said, smiling for a brief second. She glanced over her shoulder and lowered her volume just a notch. “My fifth-grader goes to the local public school. During art class, his teacher lets the kids play all the ‘clean’ versions.” She made little quote marks with her fingers when she said the word *clean*.

“What songs do they play?” I asked, truly curious.

“All of those,” she said, pointing to the screen where I had just posted the lyrics of many of the current top ten songs.

Lancaster County.

Whodathunkit?

Let’s face it. The world isn’t G-rated. When we roll our carts to the checkout counter at the corner grocery store, we are forced to navigate a gauntlet of magazine images seeped in sexuality. Do you think our kids don’t see headlines like “Try a Threesome to Spice up Your Marriage” or “Ten Ways to Please Your Boyfriend in Bed”?

Wander over to the book section next time you’re in Costco. Why shouldn’t our daughters pick up the newest attempt at *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Their twenty-seven-year-old Freshman English teacher is reading it. Raunchy entertainment media is part of the staple diet of the Millennial generation, those in their twenties and early thirties. Consider Millennial role models Chelsea Handler and Tucker Max, for example. Both of them helped make blunt and raunchy popular nearly a decade ago, and both appeared in *Vulture*’s recent list of “100 Pop-Culture Things That Make You a Millennial.” Salon describes them like this:

These two raunch-masters arrived on the scene at just about the same time—Chelsea Handler in 2005 with her first book *My Horizontal Life: A Collection of One-Night Stands* and Tucker Max in 2006 with *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*. Both made their mark by dishing about their sex lives, and generally being offensive and “real.” *The New York Times* validated Max by essentially dubbing him the inventor of a genre called “fratire.” Television validated Handler by giving her a show on E! And both showed us that being disgusting was as valid a path to success as anything else these days.²

Does this kind of raunch and crude sexual talk seep into our homes? Do you ever turn on the TV? When my dad grew up, families watched *Leave It to Beaver*. When I was a teenager, families watched *The Cosby Show*. What is the norm for families now . . . *Family Guy*? As a dad of three kids—seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one as I write this, I can’t help but worry about what they are gleaning from media entertainment today.

And I haven’t even addressed all the distractions available through the phones in our kids’ pockets. My guess is most kids aren’t spending the majority of their time on their Bible apps.

Hope for the Best

How are most parents responding to this influx of lies in our kids’ world?

The majority just hope for the best.

I wish I were making this up. McAfee recently published a study about young people’s online behavior. In this report, 69 percent of the young people surveyed admitted they take measures to hide their online behavior from their parents.³

I’m sure these parents would do something about this if they only knew . . . *right?*

Sadly, the same study revealed that “74% of parents say they don’t have the time or the energy to keep up with everything their child is doing online,” and “72% of parents say they are overwhelmed by modern technology and just hope for the best.”⁴

Hope for the best?

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Is that really all parents can do?

Maybe we need to start paying attention to what our kids are absorbing. Scratch out the word *maybe* there. Point of fact: Your pediatrician would tell you to start devoting full attention to these entertainment media messages. So would the doctors who engage in Kaiser Family Foundation's huge entertainment media study every five years. In fact, in one of their studies of the effects of entertainment media in the lives of eight- to eighteen-year-olds, they concluded:

This generation truly is the media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media. As media devices become increasingly portable, and as they spread even further through young people's environments . . . media messages will become an even more ubiquitous presence in an already media-saturated world. Anything that takes up this much space in young people's lives deserves our full attention.⁵

Doctors' orders. Are you "giving your full attention"?

Let's take just a glimpse at some of these loud voices in our kids' ears, specifically music, video games, television, and the Internet.

Music

Every generation has had song lyrics that pushed the envelope. But of late, that envelope is no longer pushed; it's wide open with someone begging you to look in.

Sexual messages are a common theme in today's music—and not just a few obscure songs, but often the most popular songs on the charts. Let me give you a few glaring examples from the last decade. One is Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," a song many remember because of his scandalous performance with Miley Cyrus at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2013. The song spent twelve weeks at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Thicke's message about women in this song is clear as he repeatedly says, "I know you want it."

When rapper T.I. joins Thicke at the mic in this song, the already offensive lyrics decline. He calls women degrading names

and describes sex in very raunchy terms. Google “Robin Thicke Blurred Lines lyrics” to peek at what the song is communicating.

The music video matched the vile lyrics, with topless girls dancing around provocatively in nothing more than G-strings. This racy video was so successful, it’s burned into the memories of teens. It rode the number one spot on the iTunes charts for more than three months. Most parents didn’t realize any kid with iTunes on their smartphone had topless women and disgusting lyrics just a click away in the top ten for almost a year. The same video also drew over 100 million views on Vevo’s music video page in just a few months’ time.

But it doesn’t take nudity to make a video sexually explicit. In fact, you don’t even need the “explicit” label to make a song explicit. Take Flo Rida’s song “Whistle,” for example. I don’t know what’s more pathetic, the fact that a song about oral sex went number one on the charts back in 2012, or the fact that people argued this song was clean.

The song was number one for several months that year, topped the iTunes charts, and became the number one ringtone that people downloaded on their cell phones.

Artists today have mastered the craft of making sexually provocative songs and music videos under the guise of “clean.” “Whistle” doesn’t have any swear words, so it’s not tagged with an explicit label. Parents who aren’t savvy to what pop culture is offering don’t realize that their kids are walking around listening to racy music for literally several hours a day.

Of course, when we talk to most young people about sexually charged music and images like this, the majority of them respond, “This stuff doesn’t affect me.”

Experts would not agree.

The journal *Pediatrics* released a study a few years ago revealing the obvious: “Teens whose iPods are full of music with raunchy, sexual lyrics start having sex sooner than those who prefer other songs.” The study was very specific:

Teens who said they listened to lots of music with degrading sexual messages were almost twice as likely to start having intercourse or

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other sexual activities within the following two years as were teens who listened to little or no sexually degrading music. Among heavy listeners, 51 percent started having sex within two years, versus 29 percent of those who said they listened to little or no sexually degrading music.⁶

But the infiltration of sexually charged entertainment media isn't limited to what is coming through our kids' headphones.

Video Games

In a country where over 90 percent of young people between the ages of two and seventeen are playing video games,⁷ it's hard to ignore what they encounter on those platforms—especially considering every time a new *Grand Theft Auto* game is released, it immediately jumps to the number one spot. Kids can't get enough of this M-rated game.

What's so scary about one video game?

In September 2013, when *Grand Theft Auto 5* was released, it broke all the sales records, raking in 1 billion dollars in the first three days. Young gamers couldn't stop talking about it. Like its predecessors, this game made every effort to maximize the M rating. Your character can go into a strip club and watch strippers remove their tops while giving you a lap dance. You can also pick up a hooker, choose three types of sex with her—oral, anal, or vaginal—and then choose a weapon to kill her with when you're done so you can get your money back. In most screen recordings you find online, the player just ran over her with his car multiple times, literally backing over her when he was through with her. Most players we viewed online were laughing while doing this.

What kind of sex are these young people learning?

Do you think Mom really knows what they're playing?

Some parents think, *My kid would never play a game like that.* That's exactly what my friend John thought. And he was right. His sixteen-year-old daughter, Elise, wouldn't play a game like that. But when she and her friend went to their friend Josh's house, Josh and his friend Chris were sitting in the living room wearing headsets and playing it.

Elise knew Josh from her church.

Elise didn’t pay much attention at first, but when she saw a guy having sex with a girl right there on the screen, she took off Josh’s headset and asked him, “What the heck are you guys playing?”

Josh claimed, “Oh, I just ignore these parts. I need the points real quick.” This wasn’t his first time playing the series. In past *Grand Theft Auto* games, characters could restore their health to 100 percent when they had sex with a prostitute.

Josh’s mom didn’t have a clue what he was playing.

The games in the *Grand Theft Auto* series aren’t the only sexually explicit games (they just happen to be the fastest-selling game on the shelf every time they are released). Popular games like *Far Cry*, *God of War*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and the *Hitman* series all have sexual content as well.

Whenever I ask young gamers what they think of the sex and violence in games, they always defend the game, responding, “I don’t really pay attention to all that sex and violence, I just love the gameplay!”

Funny, that’s similar to what they say about the TV shows they are watching.

Television

Young people are soaking in TV at a rate of two to four and a half hours a day, depending on who you ask. The Kaiser Family Foundation’s entertainment media study, frequently cited by the most respected medical journals, revealed that eight- to eighteen-year-olds devote four hours and twenty-nine minutes per day to television programming.⁸

Some parents might claim, “But my kid never sits down in front of the TV.” They don’t have to. Most of us have given them a hand-held device where they can stream their favorite programming via Hulu, Netflix, or numerous other sources.

So what are they seeing?

Sex and nudity is becoming much more prominent on TV. Most television gets away with this by using blurred, pixelated, and

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cleverly covered nudity. Many will be quick to tell you pixelated nudity “isn’t really nudity” . . . *as if nudity were the only concern.*

But this blurred nudity debate is only about broadcast television, which is a rather humorous debate when 91 percent of American homes pay for TV.⁹ When I grew up, TV meant NBC, CBS, ABC, and maybe Fox if you had a really good antenna. Now it’s not uncommon for homes to subscribe to HBO, Cinemax, or Showtime. After all, many cable and satellite companies throw in these channels free or at a discount for a limited time to entice customers to keep these channels, where sex and nudity are commonplace. All three of these channels provide soft-core porn on most given evenings.

Some of the most popular shows exist on these pay channels. *Entertainment Weekly* recently posted their esteemed 100 all-time greatest TV shows ever, where HBO earned two slots in the top ten, including the number one spot. Series like *Game of Thrones*, *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and other HBO shows all made the top 100.¹⁰

Game of Thrones, one of the most popular shows for young Millennials, is so graphic with sex and nudity that *Saturday Night Live* even did a spoof about the show, claiming it was written by a thirteen-year-old boy who made sure “there were lots of boobs in the show.” *SNL* questioned the reasoning behind a scene in an episode where a guy is receiving oral sex while peeking through a peephole watching another couple have sex. It’s not uncommon for *Game of Thrones*’ fans to see full frontal nudity of both men and women during an episode, and see several minutes of sex scenes, including lesbian sex scenes and/or threesomes. The only difference between this show and hard-core porn is the lack of extreme close-ups.

Yet if you turn on *Good Morning America*, don’t be surprised when you find Robin Roberts openly talk about watching last night’s episode of *Game of Thrones*. America can’t get enough of this show.

U.S. audiences seem to be less and less concerned about sexually explicit material. After all, it’s in their favorite shows.

In my research for this book, I interviewed literally hundreds of young people. Whenever the subject of these pay channels came

up, I’d ask, “So, did you ever find the late-night programming on these channels distracting?”

I received a variety of answers. Here’s the gist of some of the more common answers I received from different *Christian* young people:

“Yeah, I never watched them regularly, but sometimes I’d be channel-flipping and I’d land on two naked girls on top of each other. It’s pretty hard to change the channel at that point.”

“I watched late night Cinemax for about a week and finally realized I needed to tell someone to just block the channel. It was too much of a distraction to even know that channel was available in my house!”

“Lots of my friends at school would talk about something they saw on HBO or Showtime, like, ‘Did you see those two girls going at it on *Californication?*’ or ‘Did you see what happened on *Masters of Sex?*’ It made me curious so I found downloads of episodes online.”

Of all the males I asked, not one who had those channels in his house for any amount of time had *not* seen the soft-core porn or after-hours programming the channels offered. I truly searched for the one exception and never found him.

My wife, Lori, and I have noticed the trend toward this sexually charged programming on basic cable channels as well. From A&E to FX, we’ve encountered sex scenes that made us look at each other and ask, “What on earth are we watching here?” Last month we were watching a cop drama on FX. A man got into a car with a woman to negotiate some illegal activity they were planning, and the woman took off her top, spread her legs (wearing just a bra and a skirt at this point), and basically told him they had a deal if he was willing to give her oral sex. His head went down, and then we saw a shot from outside the car of her legs sticking out of the window. The channel got away with this scene because it never actually showed full breasts or genitals, but showed more than enough for your imagination to take over. The go-to sex scene for these channels is often two completely naked people

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on top of each other, with only backs, bare bottoms, and sides visible.

This is basic cable.

If full frontal nudity is the only prohibition, then you're going to encounter sexually explicit entertainment every day you turn on the TV or open a magazine.

Needless to say, Lori and I decided that this show probably wasn't one we should be watching, not just because of its nudity quota, but because we were concerned about media glamorizing cheap, random sexual encounters. It was frustrating because we were really starting to enjoy the show, but it was featuring these kinds of gratuitous sex scenes more and more.

So is TV as a whole growing more risqué?

Back in April 2013, the FCC posted a public notice about considering allowing more nudity and expletives on television.¹¹ The public expressed overwhelming outrage, with 95,000 comments. But compare that to the literally millions of viewers who watch episodes of *Game of Thrones* each week.

Does America really object?

Of course, young people will claim that watching sexually charged TV or movies doesn't affect them negatively. And again, experts wouldn't agree.

A recent study in the journal *Psychological Science* revealed that promiscuous programming promotes real-life promiscuity. Young teenagers who are exposed to more sexual content in movies start having sex at younger ages, have more sexual partners, and engage in riskier sexual activities. In fact:

Young teens who viewed movies with sexual content were profoundly influenced by what they watched. They initiated sexual behavior earlier than their peers who had viewed less sexual content, and they tended to imitate the on-screen sexual behaviors they saw—which included casual sex, having multiple partners and high-risk behaviors.¹²

A *Washington Times* article reporting the above study observed, "It's not surprising, really. Teens crave information about sex—and too often turn to the media for information."¹³

But the TV screen isn’t the only place where young people are absorbing misinformation about sex.

The Internet

Facebook, Instagram, YouTube . . . what are young people gleaning from these sources where they often spend several hours per day? And let’s be honest—does their web browsing stop at social networking?

Parents shudder at the thought of their kids viewing pornography, but sadly, Internet porn is becoming more and more difficult for kids to miss (that’s why I’ve devoted an entire chapter to helping our kids resist the lure of pornography—chapter 9).

- The average age of first Internet exposure to pornography is eleven.¹⁴
- Twenty-eight percent of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds have been unintentionally exposed to porn online.¹⁵
- Eighty-three percent of boys and 57 percent of girls have seen group sex online.¹⁶

Jamila Rizvi, editor of the online women’s site Mamamia, noticed the power of porn in the life of teenagers:

One of the things with the accessibility of the Internet is that porn is easy to get . . . it’s a click of a button away. So you’ve got 10-, 11-, 12-year-old girls, and importantly boys seeing women behaving in a particular way and they think that’s normal. There’s an element of imitation, that’s what you do when you’re a ’tween or a teen. You’re learning to become an adult so you look at the adults around you and you look at the adults on the computer.¹⁷

Even teenagers who aren’t frequenting porn are navigating an online world with those who are. The effects of porn are seeping into the communication young people are engaging in on social media sites. Sixteen-year-old Olympia Nelson speaks about this sexualized world of social media in her frank article, “Dark Undercurrents of Teenage Girls’ Selfies”:

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Seeing some of these images can feel too intimate. It's almost as though we're peering through a window. Some photos may be of girls showing skin, or girls lying on a bed. Just about all are seeking some sort of approval from their friends. The aim is not to communicate joy but to score a position. . . . The aesthetic yardstick is what they see in pornography. So girls have to conform to what boys see in pornography. And then girls post photos to "out-hot" the other girls by porn star criteria.¹⁸

If you've ever navigated through the teen world of social media, you've seen it. Even the most innocent of girls are caving to the pressure to be sexy and take selfies wearing a shirt with a plunging neckline, not just because Taylor Swift wore one, but because it's a sure way to be noticed and to get "likes."

Who doesn't want to be "liked"?

Smartphones

And what about the little device in our kids' pockets? They are used by most Americans over two and a half hours a day.¹⁹

What messages are your kids gleaming from their phones?

When I walk on a high school campus, I don't have to look far to see teenagers with their heads down, engrossed in the two-inch screen they hold in their hands. This little device can be used for all kinds of good. It can help them become better organized, keep up with positive friends, and even communicate with family. But sadly, this little tool can also open the door to plenty of distractions in a young person's life, often ending in disaster.

So what happens when catastrophe strikes? Teenagers believe the lies from all these loud voices, and many of them make costly mistakes.

How should parents respond?

How do parents typically respond when these poor decisions come to light?

The easiest and most common reaction is *overreaction*. Put your foot through the flat-screen, unplug the Internet, and move to Amish

Pennsylvania. (Oh, that’s right . . . Lancaster County parents are going through the same struggles. Maybe move to Kenya?)

If you ever let your kids out of the house (which I recommend, by the way), then they are going to encounter the world’s values. We can’t protect our kids from every racy image and wayward philosophy they encounter. Those parents who try to swoop down and save their kids from every struggle only cripple their kids from learning to stand on their own.

From Overreaction to Interaction

That’s why we need to turn our *overreaction* into *interaction*.

Which do you think works better: flipping out or pausing for a moment, taking a deep breath, and starting a dialogue with our kids about some of these influences when they encounter them?

Parents always tell me, “My kids don’t want to talk with me about this stuff.”

Perhaps that’s because we freak out every time they give us a peek into their world.

What if we stopped *overreacting* and began *interacting* about real-life struggles?

That’s the scary part for many parents. We don’t even realize what real life is for teenagers today. Some of us would be shocked if we found out.

That’s what happened to “Aaron’s” mom. She was browsing the family computer, in search of a website she had visited the day before, and found where her sixteen-year-old son, Aaron, had been browsing the night prior. As she saw the images unfold on the screen before her eyes, she burst into tears. She had never seen such perversion before. She could only ask one question: “*Why?*”

Aaron told me that when he arrived home that night, his parents were both waiting up for him. “When I saw them both sitting there together on the couch with the TV off, I knew it was serious.

“My mom was bawling. She just kept asking me, ‘Why?’”

“I couldn’t tell her why,” Aaron explained. “The only answer I could muster was, ‘I don’t know, but I just can’t stop.’”

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Aaron's mom kept pressing him, trying to find out how he could look at "this filth." Finally Aaron's dad stepped in and did something very wise. He said, "Honey, our son doesn't know why, but he's asking us for help."

What's it going to take for our kids to ask us for help?

If we're willing to sit down and truly listen to our kids, we might discover some unpleasant truths. Are we willing to have those explicit discussions?

I've met countless parents who opened the doors to conversations with their daughter and discovered she was tired of the lies and was desperately looking for truth. Many teenage girls today have bought the lie that being sexy . . . or even giving sex . . . makes them happy. I've met very few who have traveled that path and found happiness.

Donna Freitas, a former professor of religion at Hofstra and Boston Universities, addresses this in her book, *The End of Sex*, which studies the hookup culture on college campuses. She reveals, "Both young women and young men are seriously unhappy with the way things are. It's rare that I find a young woman or a man who says hooking up is the best thing ever."²⁰

She goes on to describe sex in the life of the average college kid:

Sex is something you're not to care about. The reason for hooking up is less about pleasure and fun than performance and gossip—it's being able to update about it. Social media is fostering a very unthinking and unfeeling culture. We're raising our kids to be performers.²¹

The world is screaming lies at our kids.

Are we creating an atmosphere where our kids can open up to us and dialogue about the truth?

Don't Give Up

As a fellow parent with teenagers of my own, let me encourage you, *don't give up*.

As an author who studies parenting and youth culture daily, let me reassure you, *don't give up*.

As a guy who has been hanging with teenagers since way back when they all carried papers . . . let me inspire you, *don't give up*.

Yes, the messages bombarding our kids every day seem overwhelming. But all the experts agree: Your conversations with your kids about sex make a huge difference. In fact, parents make the biggest impact. So don't be overwhelmed; this book is going to provide you with the encouragement and the tools to engage in these meaningful conversations.

Kids whose parents are hush-hush about these struggles have to figure out the answers somewhere else. Usually, that “somewhere else” is on a glowing screen or in the high school locker room.

Would you rather they hear the truth about sex from you . . . or from *2 Broke Girls*? This popular CBS comedy provides plenty of sexual humor, but doesn't typically address the consequences of living a promiscuous lifestyle.

Are you having these conversations, or are you one of the *quiet voices*? Let's pause and take a quick look at these quiet voices in the next chapter.