

# Catholic Parenting 101

## Creating a Climate to Speak To Children about Sexuality

Timothy Hogan, Psy.D., LP, CIRT

Talking with your kids about sexuality can be difficult. Most parents are afraid that they will say the wrong thing or say it at the wrong time. Because of this fear many parents avoid saying anything meaningful to their children about human sexuality. This is a tragedy; parents know better than anyone what their children need to learn.

The good news is that parents can learn how to have satisfying conversations with their children about human sexuality and relationships. The secret to creating these conversations is to create the right climate to talk with your child. There are three keys to creating the right climate to talk with children about sexuality.

### 1. Honestly evaluate the current climate.

Have you already created a climate for talking with our kids about sexuality? If we want to improve it we need to get honest about our starting point.

**2. Transform your connection with your child.** Just as veteran gardeners know that the secret to growing healthy and mature plants is to invest in the soil, veteran parents know that the secret to growing healthy and mature children is to invest in the connection they have with their children.

**3. Notice and celebrate healthy models of human sexuality.** Kids learn best from positive models about what they should do. They need us to help them notice and learn from these examples.

## 1. Honestly evaluate the current climate

Begin creating this climate with a fearless look in the mirror. What messages about sexuality are my kids already getting? Use the following questions to sketch out the climate that has already been created in your home:

- ▶ How do we (parents) dress and treat our own bodies?
- ▶ What movies and electronic media do we watch and talk about?
- ▶ What movies and electronic media have we allowed our kids to watch?
- ▶ How much affection do we show in our marriage?
- ▶ How much do we emphasize our life of faith at home?
- ▶ What sexual problems and issues (i.e., pornography, marital problems, etc.) have we left unaddressed?

Once you have a picture of the current climate, identify two or three small changes you can make. This will begin transforming your home climate so that you can eventually speak with your child about sexuality.

## 2. Transform your connection with your child

Creating a climate in which to talk with your child depends upon your relational connection. It is one thing to tell your child “I love you.” It is another thing to give your child the experience of feeling “in sync” with you, valued by you, understood by you, and even “liked” by you. This is not always easy, depending on your child’s temperament. How do we do it? There are three strategies that work wonders.

The first and most powerful strategy is to create and protect time with your child that is focused on connection through play. One simple way to create these experiences is through the use of Special Times. Child psychologists discovered many years ago that Special Times are the most powerful thing a parent could do to transform the connection with his or her child.

The second strategy that works wonders in transforming your connection with your child is to focus on the most important thirty minutes of the day: the first ten minutes of the morning, the first ten minutes after coming home from school, and the last ten minutes of the day when transitioning to bed. Why are these transition times so important? The human brain is vulnerable during times of transition. This is why people often get irritable and argumentative during times of transition. It is also, however, why children are more receptive to your compassion during transitions. When you can maintain a steady and compassionate presence during these times, you will notice an increased willingness from your child to share from the heart, transforming your connection.

A third strategy is to notice what they are doing well and persistently affirm it. For example, consider these affirmations:

- ▶ “I love watching you study so hard.”
- ▶ “I appreciate how well you treat your grandmother.”
- ▶ “I thank God for the faith I see in you.”
- ▶ “I feel so proud when I see you caring about your friends like that.”

Everybody likes to be reminded of what they are doing well. And people tend to like and feel most connected to the people who see them in the most positive light.

## 3. Notice and celebrate healthy models of sexuality.

Kids are bombarded by images of intense sexuality and relationships. They need help to sort out what is healthy and what is not. Begin by noticing how sexually healthy people get to enjoy the fruit of a good life, even though there is often a price that they have had to pay. Perhaps you could say it something like this:

- ▶ *“Hey, Chris, there’s Mr. and Mrs. Smith. They are living the good life! They’ve been married for more than forty-five years, they have a blast helping people here at church, they totally spoil their grandkids, and they have all the money they need. Who does that anymore? They are a great example of doing life God’s way! So, Chris, you think it is easy to do life like the Smiths? What battles would you guess a couple would have to fight to get to the good life they have? (Mention: Staying married means walking away when you meet someone you might like more than your spouse, passing up some job opportunities*

*that might be more fun, and even staying with it when things get boring now and then). It is amazing to me how people who invest in their vocation to their marriage keep getting more and more love in their lives."*

- ▶ *"Isn't it amazing how Sister Sarah makes such an impact on this world? She prays with her community twice every day, teaches all week, is friends with everyone down at the soup kitchen, and leads a missions trip to El Salvador every summer. She has such a full life and loves so many people. And she seems so willing to pay the price for all that love: She doesn't have a husband to cuddle with at night, and she will never have the joy of raising her own children and grandchildren. But her life sure seems to be filled with love and excitement!"*

While more challenging, it is also important to briefly comment, without lecturing, on examples of healthy and unhealthy sexuality when you see it in your child's peer culture. This is most effective as your child is coming into early adolescence. You will need to develop much more skill as they get older! Consider commenting in a way like this:

- ▶ *"I love Cecilia's outfit. It is beautiful and really seems to fit her personality. I like the way she takes such good care of herself and is able to dress so well without showing off."*

- ▶ *"So I'm wondering what you think of that girl's outfit. Do you notice what parts of her body she seems to want you to look at? She is obviously a beautiful girl, but I wonder if she is afraid that people will not think that what is in her heart and mind is enough. So here's a question for you, honey: Would you rather have someone like you because of who you are on the inside or because of how you or parts of your body look on the outside?"*

You can do this. You can create a climate that will make conversations with your child not only doable, but easy and even enjoyable. Start by giving yourself an honest self examination and remove anything from your own life that you would not want your child to experience. Then invest in the connection with your child: that is the soil in which everything else is going to grow. Finally, help your child notice the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexuality.