

Catholic Parenting 101

The Big Talk

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There was a day not long ago when teaching a child about sex was boiled down to a single “birds and the bees talk.” While few kids ever got this talk, those who did remember awkward and stammering parents attempting to fulfill their duty. The memories are filled with anxiety, but little of substance is remembered.

For many families, not much has changed. Yet, most parents today know that kids need information to equip them to navigate this technology-rich and eroticized culture. If we don't give them a compelling vision for human sexuality, someone else will. For this reason we need to give our kids “The Big Talk.” First, let's address some frequently asked questions:



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1. **What is the Big Talk?** The Big Talk teaches children about sexuality and lovemaking from a grounded spiritual perspective.
2. **Who gives the Big Talk?** It is ideal when both parents give it. If this is not possible, then either parent can do it.
3. **When should it be given?** During early adolescence; this is generally between eight and ten years old. The talk itself works best after a season of good preparation. For example, parents can tell their child, “*When you turn nine years old you will be ready to hear about one of the most awesome and sacred things in the world.*”


4. **Why tell them at such a young age? Doesn't it rob children of their innocence?** Early adolescence is the recommended age to give the Big Talk because of two basic factors. Number one, children now have the intellectual capacity to understand the logic and beauty of this message. Number two, young adolescents still like their parents! Early adolescents typically feel more positively connected with parents; once children have fully entered puberty, this talk often creates more anxiety and is less well received. Having this talk does not rob a child of innocence. In fact, it does just the opposite. It extends the innocence that should be connected with lovemaking into adolescence and adulthood. Put another way, it is easier to describe the mechanics and meaning of lovemaking to a child before interest in making love is stimulated by puberty.
5. **Where and How should the Big Talk be given?** The Big Talk can be given anywhere the child feels comfortable, preferably a place of their choosing. It is often helpful to set aside several hours for this. The child can choose a place for a meal or a snack, followed by a walk in a park or a drive. (Talking while moving can help reduce anxiety for everyone.) This way, by the time parents are having the Big Talk, the child will feel grounded in connection with the parents.

Now comes the fun part: **What do you tell them?** Think of the Big Talk as a journey with ten short stops. There are many roads that lead to each of these stops. The best way to get to each is through questions and conversation. It is likely that your child already knows much of this, and it will be more fun if they can tell you, rather than hearing a long lecture. When your child does not have a true answer, then it is time to teach a little bit.

Consider the following roadmap for this journey:

1. You want them to know that this is a talk about being human and help them to see that people are the best part of God's creation. Consider starting with this question: *"What are the most awesome and sacred things in the world?"* Be sure you make your way to the first stop: People are the most awesome and sacred things in the world. Why? Only people can show us love.
2. Now you want to remind them that God did not have to create people in God's image. God created people out of love. You can start with this question: *Why did God create people?* You eventually want to get to an answer like this: God created people to share in God's love. We are here because God is full of love, so God created people in God's image and likeness to share in this love.
3. Children are now in a place to think about how people organize their lives to love. Remind them that there are lots of ways for people to share in God's love, namely, being single, married, or a priest or religious. (Use examples of people you know.) You are preparing them to see how a special kind of married love is the source of the most *awesome and sacred thing in the world: people*.
4. First, clarify *how single people love*. Ask, *"How do single people (use an example of someone you know) share in God's love?"* Elicit ways that single people love, such as talking with friends, serving those in need, and as well as hugging and snuggling with those close to them. If possible, point out that single people have unique freedoms (for example, to move, travel, keep their own schedules) and responsibilities (for example, commitments to friends, jobs, and so on).
5. Now begin to clarify how married people love. Ask, *"How do married people share in God's love?"* Clarify that they share in God's love in many of the same ways that single people do. In addition, tell your child that married people also get to snuggle and kiss in a way that is amazing, sacred, wonderful and beautiful. It binds and connects people so closely that the Bible calls it becoming "one flesh."
6. Now you can explain where babies come from. Remind your child that people are the most awesome and sacred things on the planet. And not only are they created *because* God loves us but they are also created *from* that special way married people share in God's love called "one flesh" or "making love." Explain how married people, when they have privacy and the time to show how much they love each other, after snuggling and kissing for a long time, make love together. Be direct. Explain that they take off their clothes and get very close, so that the husband's penis goes inside his wife's vagina. You do not need to talk about sperm and eggs right now unless your child asks. Empathize that it might not sound enjoyable to a nine- or ten-year old. (In fact, it might sound very strange! That's OK!). However, let them know that it is very wonderful and sacred, and connects people closely. It is an *amazing and sacred* thing to do, and, when it mixes with God's love, sometimes creates the most *amazing and sacred* part of God's creation, a new person!

How do
married people
share in
God's love?

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7. Clarify here that lovemaking and having children are designed to happen only with married people. Ask, *"Why should this only happen with married people?"* Emphasize that lovemaking is a gift for married people who can give a new baby the security and love of a family.
 8. Be sure to emphasize that this information is wonderful and sacred, and is only to be discussed with parents, not siblings or peers. Clarify that other kids, including siblings, get to have their own special conversations with their parents. Telling them ahead of time would ruin that talk. Prepare the child for discussions that they will likely have with peers or extended family. You might want to ask if they have heard other words used for lovemaking. Clarify that many people use less-nice words because they have not yet learned how *amazing* and *sacred* lovemaking is. Emphasize that even though they now may know more than their peers, they should not try to correct or educate anyone else.
 9. Be prepared to address any difficult questions or controversial issues that might come up because of this talk. Consider situations familiar to the child of children who were born outside of a traditional marriage, such as "unwanted" pregnancies, single moms, adopted children, or families with single parents due to divorce. See the article "Difficult Questions and Controversial Topics" for ideas about how to handle these questions.
 10. Invite the child to keep this conversation going! This is the main part of the Big Talk, but children will often have other questions once they've had time to think about this information. Be sure to repeat the mantra, *"Please come to me with any questions you have in this area so we can talk, OK? I will be very grateful if you do!"*