

Talking about sex with our children and churches

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As editor Eric Black recently mentioned, sex is “[front and center](#)” in media and denominational discussions, but it is often in reaction to scandals and controversy. Seldom is the church offering and ordaining proactive and positive messages about human sexuality that celebrate it as gift to be enjoyed.

Why should the church be a part of these discussions? Does the church have anything to offer? If we claim to be the “City on a Hill” and a prophetic witness, then we have marked improvements to make in this area. Here are some suggestions.

Recognize and honor the many survivors in our midst.

If one in four women has been sexually abused and one in six men, our congregations are heavily populated with people who have experienced adversity in profound ways (many of whom have also been victims of spiritual injury). As a result, we must be aware of language, media and resources we use that can trigger and further traumatize survivors in our midst.

Pastors and staff need to have a vetted list of trusted professionals in their community to whom they can refer people and from whom they can learn about how churches can become a trauma-informed space. If abuse were to occur in the congregation, this network could help the pastoral staff and larger community manage such a complex situation.

Clergy in rural and otherwise isolated communities can network via technology to staff cases needing the assessment of a clinical eye if in-person resources are not readily available.

Create a trauma-informed culture with a clear message that children are a priority.

Most churches have some sort of child protection policy, but few have a culture of protection where trainings are paired with those policies and where clearly outlined safety plans exist for known sex offenders. Creating such a culture requires us to be as “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Churches modeling best practices go beyond legal matters—background checks and written policies—to embrace a spirit of care. In these churches, staff and volunteers learn to rely on and share their intuition by observing volunteers and engaging children more fully. They also truly believe all children are God’s children and all children are our children.

Our mandate as people of faith must go beyond “not getting sued” to care more deeply and take seriously our calling to be stewards of the vulnerable.

Give name to sexual assault and talk about it.

Black mentions most pastors are not comfortable talking about sex from the pulpit. Although understandable because our culture has co-opted sex, the Bible has much to say about it.

David’s acquisition of Bathsheba for his own purposes—which led to rape,

impregnation and murder—often is overlooked. Instead, David often is lauded as a man after God’s own heart, without hearing of his moral and spiritual deficiencies.

Can you imagine how a survivor might feel if he/she heard a pastor speak truth to the power of sexual violence? Or conversely, a pastor lauding David without noting his abuse of power?

Although a sermon about sexual assault very well could be triggering to a survivor, it also could serve for healing and resiliency to hear a person of faith—in power—publicly name the injustices so many have experienced.

Offer our members, children through adults, an alternative view of human sexuality.

Black says, “We know children need to know something about sex, but not too much too soon.” My hunch is that Black is specifically talking about intercourse here because children are born sexual and don’t necessarily need reminders of that. However, we are embodied.

Children arrive fully human, and sexuality is part of the gift by which God knits them together in their mother’s womb.

Some topics are not age-appropriate, but because of damaging messages of sex, we often tend to tell children too little too late. Our children come to us for guidance, and if we refuse to unpack our own baggage around sex, bodies and relationships, we will not be able to equip them adequately for a very confusing world that tells them sex sells but breastfeeding isn’t allowed in public.

We have to send the message that *we are up to the task of talking about*

difficult topics.

One easy way the church can begin this conversation with caregivers is to offer intentional trainings to normalize the conversation.

I offer a curriculum that empowers caregivers of faith to create open communication with their children about topics such as sexual development, puberty, consent and intimacy.

When children are given the freedom and words to report if a boundary has been violated—using proper terms and clear language, coupled with a home environment that normalizes conversations around bodies and boundaries—the risk of victimization is reduced.

Perhaps caregivers would feel more encouraged and empowered to be brave in this area of parenting if their church endorsed—and sponsored—such open communication.

Celebrate sex, bodies and intimacy as a gift from God.

A study reports that when the Swedes teach their children about sex, they focus on “joy, responsibility and pleasure,” while Americans focus on “fear, risk and shame.”

If we are to reclaim the narrative about sex—that God declared it good and meant it to be enjoyed within the parameters of a responsible partnership—we need to communicate that message to our children.

Focusing on the goodness and joy of sex seems counterintuitive to us because we have been enculturated to feel shame about desire and bodies. We need to write a new chapter on this and reclaim a botched narrative of unhealthy sexuality.

The above steps are a beginning to a much larger conversation. It will take bravery to create spaces of transparency and openness, but the time is now if we will accept the opportunity.

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