

Why Are Teens Really Hiding Their Sexual Reality From Their Parents?

Sexual revelations about their children shake *most* parents to the core.

Let's face it—"our little Katie" getting naked with a boy or "our little Kevin" guzzling porn on his smart phone and chronically masturbating is an exercise that—again—*most* parents can't mentally engage or never want to imagine.

However, to personally witness the shock, awe, shame, and personal disappointment in themselves as they deal with a teenage sexual revelation *after the fact* is even more painful. Their face says it all:

- What happened?
- How did we miss this?
- Why didn't they come to me?
- Have I failed to pass on my values?
- Am I such a bad parent?

These are the questions parents around the country are asking themselves in the wake of deeply held moral and spiritual expectations colliding with what are, for parents, unexpected sexual revelations about their children. When attempting to counsel parents in that moment, it becomes clear to me that the approach the majority of parents are taking to sex education in the home needs a major overhaul and some new communication channels to stem the tide of sexual regret in families.

Too Little, Too Late, Too Naïve

Parents are notorious for taking great interest in *other* boys

or girls connected to their kids whose beliefs and behaviors could influence them negatively. Moms know how to seamlessly blend motherly concern with counter-intelligence gossip to protect the well being of their cubs. The tools and techniques of the maternal intelligence community today involve smart-phones, apps, i-Pads, social media stalking, and the neighborhood “*momfia*” network. This organization convenes under the guise of “check-in” calls, walks, church bible studies, coffees and yoga classes.

Intel is gathered and shared, the lives of high school boys and girls are discussed, the social media posts of the same are analyzed, and the motherly equivalent of a threat assessment for their child is filed away for use later in subtle conversations over yogurt, on the ride home from practice, or at the dinner table. In this world, the problem doesn’t rest with the parents, the child, or the communication between them. It rests “out there” in the culture and the relationships surrounding our kids.

Where’s the dad you say? *If* one is present, he relies almost exclusively on mom’s Intel and, typically, is only called in for an airstrike when maternal anxiety rises to DEFCON 4. When that happens it means one of three things for a dad: an awkward “big talk,” the taking away of a privilege, or a home confinement sentence after school!

This is done with the expectation that the “message” will be sent and received by a teen resulting in behavior modification. After that is accomplished an “all clear” signal can be flashed to mama bear. The airstrike approach is a *talk down* approach that smart teenagers immediately read as disingenuous because most dads would rather retain their roles as King of the Castle, Good Cop, or Fun Guy versus Mommy Mercenary.

Everything in dad’s body language screams: “I am here doing this because your mom is making me do this.” Now, perhaps your

home doesn't mirror this system exactly or you may think that your approach is more proactive. But in either case, the reality is that if your child is sexually active or sexually struggling, *the odds are overwhelmingly against you knowing.*

So, if teens are not telling their parents about their sexual reality, who are they telling?

Revealing Their Sexual Struggles

I recently spent time with three veteran youth workers who have been trusted by teens with their personal sexual revelations. Each of these spiritual mentors oversees large groups of boys and girls and have over 30 years combined experience in youth ministry. These leaders provided me with some shocking feedback every parent needs to hear.

They also provided some critical advice for parents of teens regarding the timing and approach they should take into sexual conversations with teens. I asked each of them a few simple questions about their recent and real time experience with the sexual revelations of teens.

We discussed, unpacked, and observed the following:

- Twenty-two instances within the last year with 13 girls and 9 boys where they confided in their group leader about a current sexual involvement or struggle
- 100% of the sexual revelations by girls all concerned direct physical involvement of some kind with a boy
- 100% of the sexual revelations by boys all concerned viewing pornography on their smart phones, uncontrollable lust, and chronic masturbation
- None of the girls' parents knew anything about their sexual involvement as it was happening and do not know now
- 1 teenage boy shared his sexual struggle with a parent as it was happening. This exchange went so poorly that he said he would not talk about sexual things again with

his parents.

Let's be clear, these were informal interviews with front line teenage troops on the ground. But I was able to draw one inescapable conclusion that was affirmed by all three youth workers: *teenagers are hiding their sexual reality from their moms and dads*. By default this means that great parents—by the millions—are unknowingly and ignorantly missing out on the biggest and most powerful part of their child's emotional, spiritual, & relational development in these critical years.

That hard reality should move us on every level. First, it should move us to change our approach. Second, it should move us to seek out the best resources which bridge this communication gap. Lastly, but most importantly, it should move us to learn how to successfully open talk with our teenage sons and daughters preemptively and proactively.

Winning Communication With a Teen

Start early. Regardless of age, the best way for a parent to build a healthy sexual foundation for their child is time, talk, and appropriate touch. All of these communicate love and worth and those children that have high time, high talk, and high touch from parents (especially from fathers) have a lower risk of premature sexual involvement. Loved children of all ages feel safe and that safety must be present for open communication about difficult topics.

Talk openly. Teens and young adults love being treated like a grown-up and feel trusted when adult subjects are raised even though they are not “swimming in the deep end of the pool” just yet. They love when a parent or mentor can tell them what they can expect to see or feel as they are approaching certain biological and social crossroads that can be both awkward and scary for them. When you tell them in advance and they see or experience exactly what you predicted, it makes you the trusted source for information. If they see, feel, or

experience something sexually that you have never talked about with them, they are not sure if that topic is one they can put on the table with you. In that case, most young adults will err to the conservative, not want to “freak you out” and keep quiet.

Treat them maturely. When you want to interact with a teenager about the topic of sex know this—they hate being talked down to by a parent. The reason is obvious: it is because they feel like they are growing up! So instead of making them feel like a kid, *talk up to them* as young as adults who are becoming men and women.

Dads play an especially important role in this transition for teenagers by their confirming and affirming the transition to adulthood. Dads also provide a powerful blessing when they make it a man-to-man discussion with sons and call them up. With daughters, dads speak powerfully into the self-worth and love-ability of daughters by affirming the special and beautiful nature of young women that requires protecting them sexually.

Parent intentionally in the sexual area. This means that there are planned grade level discussions, planned events, and planned statements or conversations about sexual development, practice, and expectations within your family and faith system. Young teens especially benefit from a planned weekend with mom or dad where, in the context of having a blast or enjoying a favorite activity, they go through a facilitated and detailed discussion BEFORE they enter the jungle of sexual promiscuity, practice, and pressure among their peers.

Again, if they have already heard about things from you and expect what’s coming, talking about it when the pressure or temptation comes will feel less awkward or shaming. I told my oldest before she went to her first high school dance two things before we dropped her off. I said, “Cara you will see kids kissing and making out as well as kids possibly using

alcohol and talking and acting funny. We'll talk about the dance when you get home." Guess what happened? Kids were making out and some came drunk to the dance acting funny. When she came home she told me all about it and thought I had a super power or a crystal ball. The lesson here is that parents who hope to be in the "know" must intentionally, preemptively, and proactively integrate sexual realities coming at their kids if you they want to have authentic sexual discussions later.

At a Christian college in Ohio, I had the task of entering these deep sexual waters with hundreds of guys and girls. More specifically, I spoke about how the guys could help the girls and the girls could help the guys in this area. When I looked into the audience, I could tell by their rapt attention *this topic was the one they were waiting for someone to address with them*. They were paying such close attention because they were curious, sex is mysterious, and they need help handling the tension and excitement they feel on the inside from someone they trust.

I talked up to them, treated them like adults, and shot straight. After the talk, a long line formed mostly to say thanks for being real, talking to them like grown ups, and identifying with their struggle. Allow this reception and response to coach us here. Appropriate, mature, proactive sexual discussion will lower the risk of your child having to go to someone else or, worse, hide their sexual reality from you.

Here is how you can get started:

Sex, Love, Date Parent Starter Pack – A great tool which helps start the conversation about sex is deeply appreciated by both parents and teens—it takes the pressure off. Every Man Ministries has created the SEX LOVE DATE starter pack for churches and parents which does the hard work for you of getting the mind and heart prepared for healthy and interactive discussion on the real sexual issues facing teens

in culture today from a practical and faith perspective.

[Click here](#) to view the curriculum and to order the package.

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