

one
**HIGH
VOLTAGE!**

C*aut**ion!* Reading this book may change your life. If you picked up this book, it's likely you have a child or two who will be ready to have "the talk" in the near future, and you're arming yourself with the courage and details necessary to successfully navigate the unknown waters of talking with your kids about sex.

First, thank you for your willingness to take on the parental responsibility of educating your children about their bodies and the purposes for which they are intended; and second—hang on. Stewarding our children's sexuality is a skill set that has been lost, and a multitude of voices are willing to serve that role for parents if parents remain silent. The educational system attempts to assist parents in this process but operates from a different worldview—or lens—than that of most Christians. Simply knowing enough

to identify what the parts do, where they go, and what happens when the parts intersect is not the ideal version of “the talk.” Parents must talk to their children about the emotional and spiritual dimensions of sexuality rather than just the physical aspects.

Unfortunately, alarming numbers of parents are abdicating this responsibility to the health-class teachers of middle school and high school students across the country.

Another culprit in educating children about sex is the media. Not just the tabloids, Hollywood, and *Playboy*, but *all* types of media. YouTube, Facebook, iTunes, Spotify, Vine, and other products offer an endless supply of seemingly innocent material, the vast majority of which is laden with tremendous sexual innuendo and the blatant objectification of other people as things.

Late Stanford psychologist Al Cooper in discussing the rise of Internet pornography coined the phrase “triple-A engine” to describe why this trend grows at such a rapid pace. The three As in the triple-A engine are *accessibility*, *affordability*, and *anonymity*.¹ Cooper proposed that these three variables accounted for the enormous growth in pornography use with the birth of the Internet in the early 1990s.

These three drivers of the growth in pornography use in Western civilization extend well beyond the computer. Music with lyrics about promiscuity and sexuality are abundant and can be accessed for free without anyone knowing. A great example of this is Rhianna’s song titled “S&M,” which depicts sexual connection as a violent exchange of pain and pleasure, devoid of much connective emotional content. While inaccessible on YouTube, a brief search for this song on Google provides access to a world of sexuality that is certain to taint an adolescent or teenager’s understanding of what healthy sexuality entails. And the content that is accessible on YouTube provides a much darker

look into the world of commercial sexuality that sweeps away many children and adolescents.

Other cultural influencers, including Mark Laaser of Faithful and True in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, a leading Christian sexual addiction specialist, have added a fourth “A” to Cooper’s initial theory: *accidental*. Easy as it may be to envision a six-year-old stumbling across an inappropriate Web site while conducting a search for a favorite cartoon character, what is accidental to a child is not accidental to the industry that is looking to get its product in front of as many consumers as possible—at younger and younger ages. Porn users of yesteryear bought it from adult bookstores or convenience stores. Now, porn seeks out potential users by trolling the Internet, gaming sites, and e-mail. For example, <www.coke.com> was a pornography Web site until Coca-Cola purchased back the domain name for a staggering amount of money. Web sites such as <pokemon.com>, <whitehouse.com>, and others have been used to “accidentally” expose young children to depictions of human sexuality that are incongruent with the child’s development, opening a Pandora’s Box in the minds of young boys and girls.²

The video game industry is another arena in which the pornography industry targets young consumers. Forget Vegas; in the life of a fourteen-year-old boy, what happens online stays online. Unfortunately this is not true. We carry many of those shocking yet simultaneously pleasing images with us across our lifetimes, seeking to explore the curiosities and possibilities we are exposed to. The average age of exposure to pornographic content is eleven years of age—and getting younger.³

Another area in which media sends subtle yet powerful messages about sexuality is through children’s movies. Messages regarding sexuality are present in a variety of forms. One variety of influence is the music that is selected for inclusion in films.

As in most families, my children have watched a variety of G or PG animated movies without much prescreening. (You are shocked to hear this, I know.) As an aside, the Internet Movie Database (<imdb.com>) provides a great resource for reviewing movies for language, violence and gore, sexual content/nudity, drug-and-alcohol-related content, and frightening or graphic images before you watch them.

I was made aware of the impact of the music that is included in children's movies one Sunday night after our small-group meeting. My older son, who was five at the time, was having a great time playing with the daughter of our friends from our small group. They had run laps around the house during the group meeting, had come down for snacks and drinks, and were playing again when it came time for her family to leave. As we were saying our goodbyes for the evening, I heard my son invite his friend upstairs to the playroom. "I want to show you something," he said with enthusiasm. The two of them slipped toward the steps, not realizing I had overheard their conversation and had crept silently up the steps behind them. As I observed them, my fears were assuaged by the fact that my son was simply showing her his favorite new toy with his famous "isn't-it-awesome" voice.

I announced my presence with a simple question—"What are you all doing up here?" Startled, my son, who was still red in the face from all the running and wearing too many layers of clothes, made a somewhat silly face at his friend and sang the lyrics "I'm sexy and I know it" while stripping off his outer layer of clothing, a heavy sweater. For the sake of full disclosure, I have to admit that my initial response was to laugh. It was one of those incredibly cute moments involving your kids that you carry with you forever.

The shock and laughter quickly turned to concern: *When did Magic Mike move in with me, and what happened to my innocent five-year-old?* I thought. Upon further investigation, it turns out

that the music he was singing came from a movie my wife and I had introduced him to, *Madagascar 3*. I would be remiss if I tried to convince you that this failure as a parent was my only failure; however, we were able to turn the experience into a conversation about modesty and his body, appropriate relationships with the opposite sex, and what *sexy* even means.

The lesson that we took away from this experience is that while we cannot necessarily control the content that enters our children's lives (although we do filter much of it), we are responsible for helping them understand what the content is suggesting and how this content stands against the truths of Scripture, even when it's silly or seemingly innocent. With movies such as Disney's *Brave*, in which adults' and children's bare buttocks are visually depicted, we must recognize that the messages being sent to our children about the innocence of nudity only ups the ante. Stewarding their sexuality will become more difficult, because the messages they receive from the culture around them will become more intense.

Back to my previous word of caution: while this book is certainly designed to help equip you to engage in a more intentional and thorough version of "the talk"—think of it of more as "the conversation"—with your children at a variety of ages and stages, it will also force you to complete two other difficult tasks: (1) exploring your own sexual past and development and (2) discussing sexuality in the context of your spousal relationship (if applicable). Before initiating "the conversation," it is important to invest yourself into the task of exploring any potential areas of interference that might come up that have little to do with your kids and much more to do with your own story.

Our American culture has developed an uncanny ability to avoid the process of exploring our own experiences. Denial of the past, projecting our own shortcomings or faults onto others,

and simply displacing our anger, fear, shame, and sadness have become commonplace. I'll sum it up in one terrifying yet familiar catchphrase—"It wasn't me"—which also happens to be the phrase for a graphically disturbing song from years past. While there may be some truth to the fact that we inherit a variety of concerns and potential problems from choices made by others that in no way involved us—such as abuse, neglect, molestation, and others—the fact remains that it is our responsibility to seek healing and take ownership for *our responses to those choices*, whether those previous injuries and abuses were initiated by a spouse or someone else. When it comes to exploring our previous sexual experiences, these defense mechanisms tend to manifest themselves with an intensity seen in few other circumstances, sometimes more so within the church than outside it. And our spouse is the one bearing the brunt of the impact.

Think back to your early sexual experiences for a moment. Let yourself re-experience the gentle touch of holding hands. Did you know that the largest organ is skin and is tied closely to sexuality? Your heart pounded in your chest the first time your fingers locked, and your mind raced with excitement. Then came the first kiss. Your heart pounded even faster this time, and perhaps you became intoxicated with emotion at the experience of your lips meeting another's for the first time. These experiences create a powerful neurological experience that is nearly impossible to duplicate.

The purpose of this experience is to facilitate pair bonding, or attachment, which is a state of physical, emotional, and spiritual closeness in the relationship. At sixteen we are likely to believe these bonds will never rupture and that the "love" we are experiencing will transcend any challenge that life can throw at us. We fail to realize in these mostly innocent adolescent moments that our hormones are driving the bus, and the feelings we expe-

rience are predominantly induced by a neurohormone known as phenylethylamine or PEA, which is a hallucinogen.⁴ Love struck, we believe that this high will last forever. Then life throws us the curveball of breakup, divorce, or severed relationship, and the delusion is shattered by the coldness of reality.

Unfortunately, all of us have been forced to experience the pain of rupture at some point. Reflect now, if you will, on the experience of losing the relationship in which “love” blossomed. Experience again the sadness, perhaps even despair, you experienced at the thought of no longer being connected to this significant other with whom you first held hands or shared that special kiss. The intensity and excitement of those early experiences gave way to the hurt of brokenness and fear of never being loved again. This experience is difficult enough to navigate on its own; add a high-pleasure, high-shame-based experience like sexual exploration, and the stakes—and consequences—get even higher. An association has been made, a bond has been forged, and bonds are difficult to undo once they have been experienced, which is why you can recall many of these powerful experiences almost as if they were yesterday.

If there is a sense of shame surrounding these sexual encounters from an earlier developmental period in your life, you are not alone. Many whom I have counseled in my years as a therapist have early shame-based sexual experiences that they have been unable to escape. Shame has a subtle influence in our cognitive and emotional functioning. Specifically, we see shame as the root of avoidance in relationship with others. Consider the following passage from Genesis 3:6-10—

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes

of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

In the biblical narrative and in everyday life, shame serves the same essential function: covering and hiding. They made coverings for themselves to hide their nakedness, and they hid in the garden when God walked among them.

When I was younger, probably ten or eleven, my brother had a birthday coming up, which meant one thing: birthday mail—and not just birthday mail but birthday mail with birthday *money*! On this particular day I raced home to the mailbox, and to my excitement, in the mail was a birthday card for my brother from our great-grandmother. Birthday money! However, rather than racing inside and handing the card to my brother, I raced up to my room with the stolen loot, eager to claim my prize.

Much to my disappointment, when I opened the card, there was a check for ten dollars inside. A ten-year-old cannot do much with a check; so to cover my tracks I did what most lazy children that age do—I tore it up and threw it in my mess of a closet, where I believed it was gone for eternity. No more shame! In that closet, my mind convinced me that it was as far as the east is from the west. Buried, never again to rear its ugly head and remind me of my cowardice and greed.

At least it was buried until a few months later, when I had failed to clean my room after repeated requests. My parents, much to their dismay, I’m certain, physically assisted me in com-

pleting this seemingly enormous task. We cleaned under the bed, in my dresser, and eventually in the closet, where my transgression had lain silently for months to the point that I had forgotten its existence.

My father found the first piece and inquired, “What is this?” The sickening grip of shame began to encroach on my digestive system. “I don’t know” was all I could muster, and my mind raced back to that fateful afternoon. Within minutes the full knowledge of my deed had been discovered, and shame drove me to the darkest corner I could escape to: under my bed—which was now accessible to me, ironically enough.

I covered myself, and I hid. My shame was as smothering as the space I had shrunken into. Tearfully, I recounted what I had done, and my parents set out to make amends with my brother, who had no awareness that anything had transpired. I lay there in the darkness, weeping.

It is quite easy as parents to unknowingly live a life of shame, simply discounting our past experiences and praying our children never discover the brokenness we once embodied or perhaps that which we currently experience. How quickly we disengage from conversations pertaining to sexuality because of the painful or shameful memories from our own pasts! In the general public most people are afraid to discuss suicide, because they believe that actively discussing suicide makes individuals with suicidal thoughts more likely to attempt the act.

We know that the reverse is true. Having open discussion about suicide actually prevents suicide attempts among the general population. As neuroscientist Dan Siegel states in his book *The Whole-Brain Child*, we must “name it to tame it.”⁵ When things exist in secrecy, they have enormous power in our lives. In the church and in good Christian homes I fear we have bought into a similar lie: if we discuss sexuality, our children or our

youth group members will go and experiment sexually. If we teach them about it, they will go try it.

This myth, which paralyzes parents and pastors alike, perpetuates the shame children feel about sexuality, because it remains something secret, something dirty, or something taboo. Growing healthy children must begin with a vulnerability and willingness to share our brokenness with them, ideally in appropriate ways and at appropriate times in their development, which we will eventually explore together. We must talk with them about the gift that God has given us in sex so that they understand the sacramental nature of sexuality and how to steward it well. If you are living a shame-saturated life due to unfortunate sexual experiences, no matter how valiant your attempts to protect your children from the consequences you continue to experience, they will ultimately bear the weight of it. Through counseling, spiritual direction with a pastor, and support groups in the church or the community, you must find healing so that you can steward your children's sexuality from a place of completeness. One of the truisms from the counseling field is "Hurting people hurt people." A parent who struggles with sexual brokenness is ultimately likely to raise a child with a similar sexual brokenness.

If you have made it to this point in the book, I applaud you for facing some uncomfortable content. If you need to take a break and process through some of the memories and/or emotions that have emerged during your reading, I would encourage you to do that. Call a friend and process what you're thinking and feeling. Open a journal and write expressively. Take a long walk or jog and allow your mind to wander and sift through everything. Whatever you do, please do not bury anything you have experienced. The path to wholeness for yourself and for the well-being of your children starts with your confronting memories that have perhaps been long buried. Shame would have you

cover yourself with half-truths and hide your story behind veiled secrets, but there is no freedom in shame—only loneliness and despair. Know that you are not alone in responding to this content in that way; bring those things that you have covered or hidden for so long into the light of disclosure, and find healing by reaching out to trusted companions and loved ones.

Now that you have had a chance to reflect on your past, take a deep breath, and prepare yourself for digging into the next layer of content. Discussing sexuality in the marriage relationship also unearths previous hurts and disappointments that frequently inhibit teaching children about sexuality. Wounds from issues such as unmet sexual expectations as far as excitement or frequency of intercourse and discovered betrayals such as pornography or infidelity create a pain that causes us to shrink away from actively engaging our children in discussion about human sexuality.

In fact, the nature of the marriage relationship creates a context in which many of the painful, scary, shameful, and otherwise unpleasant experiences you reflected on in the previous section are brought to the present moment and re-experienced. But rather than having a corrective influence in your life, the relationship that was designed to be a source of safety, trust, and intimacy eventually becomes another source of injury. Many of the stories I hear in my clinical practice provide insight into this relational reality. Perhaps one of these is similar to your story.

My father was a perfectionist, and I never felt I could do anything to make him happy. Now I feel the same way with John, my husband. According to him, I am “never interested enough in sex” or “never willing to try new things.” All I feel when I think about our sex life is that I do not measure up, that I am a failure, and that it will never change. He is just like my father.

Or maybe this story is similar to yours:

“Hovering” doesn’t even begin to describe my mother’s presence in my life. While I appreciated the help at an early age, at some point I just learned to disengage and stop caring. Mom was going to do it for me even if I *wanted* to do it myself. There was never space for me to grow up, which I am a little angry about, I guess. Now I feel the same way about my sex life. Even though I want to connect sexually with my wife, I don’t want to face the rejection. She runs the marriage, and when she is ready for sex, she will let me know. I guess I am a little angry about that as well.

Or—

I don’t feel as if I ever learned to be a sexual person until I was a teenager. I never saw my parents showing one another affection. They never sat on the couch together, never hugged, never held hands, never kissed in front of us kids. I learned about sex from other places, such as my friends and pornography. Whatever I was curious about, there was an answer just a click away. When I got married, my expectations were based on the videos I had seen and stories I had heard, not the reality of the woman in front of me and her emotional and spiritual needs. I really hurt her with the things I introduced into our sexual relationship. I wish I could take them back.

Or—

For me sex was a gateway to affection. It helped me become popular, keep boyfriends, and even get promoted. Men cared about me more when I was giving them sex. . . . When I got married, sex became a way to get what I wanted. I traded sex to feel cared for. I still have a hard time believing that love can be “unconditional.”

Sex has become a commodity in American culture. It has become detached from its created purposes, perverted, and dangles before us as some prize to be won or escape to be found. And

to make things more difficult, redeeming sexuality within the church is an uphill battle.

Stewarding our children's sexuality well is perhaps one of the most uncomfortable, confusing, embarrassing, rewarding responsibilities we will ever have. For us to be able to fulfill this role well, we must explore our sexual history for lingering assumptions or injuries as they shape if and how we teach and talk about sex.

Many of you will be the first in generations—maybe ever—to broach the topic with your children. Good! To do this you must establish a place of safety and trust in the marriage relationship that corrects some of the filth—false assumptions, negative experiences, and unrealistic expectations—that culture has worked into you. Through spouses engaging one another in open conversation about sex in their own marriage, the Holy Spirit begins the process of working out that which the world has worked into you; you can finally find the healing and freedom you've been looking for. When you initiate this important conversation with your children, you become co-participants with the Holy Spirit in that process for them.

The following questions are for reflection and discussion before you initiate “the conversation” with your children. You may wish to discuss these with your spouse, and professional counseling may be appropriate depending on your responses.

1. What sexual experiences have you never disclosed to anyone? How do these experiences shape your sexual relationship in your marriage? Who is someone trustworthy you could share your story with?
2. How has sex been negotiated in your marriage to this point? Is it mutually agreed upon?
3. How comfortable do you feel conversing with your spouse about your sex life?
 - a. Not at all comfortable

- b.* Somewhat comfortable
 - c.* Mostly comfortable
 - d.* Very comfortable
4. What sexual practices in the relationship make you uncomfortable? Where did these practices originate—inside the relationship or before the relationship began, such as in teenage or college years, with a different partner? Have you voiced your feelings?
 5. What safeguards do you have in place to keep sexual temptation from impacting your marriage relationship? Internet filtering software? Men's and women's accountability groups? Something else?