

“The Talk”

Faithfully Talking to Youth About Sex

As you consider whether to implement a sex education program for the youth of your church, please consider the following:

- The church has a responsibility to guide the youth to whom it ministers. We are called to be reflections of the body of Christ. As much as we deny and sometimes forget/neglect the topic of sex and sexuality, we are doing a disservice to our youth and our calling from God when we don't acknowledge our sexuality as an important piece of who we are created to be. The church is called to assure young people, in an open and compassionate way, that not only do conversations regarding sex belong within the church, but the church family is exactly where sexuality should be openly discussed.
- Hopefully, the young people you are serving are receiving some sort of sex education. Even the best secular sex education curriculums must stay separate from a key factor that we, the church, are called to explore – we are people of God. Young people need to be given the information regarding the joy of being created in God's image. This is the most unique and important aspect surrounding sexuality and one's choice to engage in sexual activity or not, and the church must “complete the story.”

Beginning the Process

Start with yourself. As you begin the process of developing a sex education program for young people, you must begin with YOU. There are a lot of reasons why sex is an uncomfortable topic for many of us. We all have questions or areas of our own sexuality that cause us anxiety. It is not fair to you or to the young people you are ministering to if you allow those normal and understandable feelings to get in the way of the important message you are trying to convey. So do some of your own work to become more comfortable with these trouble spots. This can be done by reading literature (some suggestions are found in the resource section) or talking with a trusted colleague or friend. It may even be beneficial to seek the counsel of a professional. Again, this is a chance for you to seek some clarity with a difficult topic that often leaves many of us with multiple questions and challenging feelings. There is no shame in going through this process. Don't forget to include God on this journey through prayer, scripture, and the guidance of the Spirit.

Seek Support. After you begin the self-work, it is time to recruit others to assist you in the development of the sex education program. Do NOT try to develop the program by yourself! This is very important for you, the church family, and the sex education program. You will want to remember this during the entire program process. You will want to be as transparent as possible and include input from others. Building the sex education program with others will help keep you safe and help to ensure that it reflects the beliefs of your church community. The most successful program will evolve when it is an entire church program not just exclusively a “youth” program.

Create a common vision. With a team, you will create a common vision of what you want the young people to experience during the program. What do you hope they take with them after the experience is over?

Questions that you might want to consider are:

- Critical topics the program should cover. (The answer to this question may vary from church to church.)
- Logistics (How the program should be run? Schedule, rooms, meals, group size).
- Gender sensitivity (Dividing based on identity/experience: all, some, or none of the time).
- Leadership: Who should be your leaders? (Depending on the topics you are going to cover, you might want to invite a pediatrician, counselor, or some other professional to assist in leadership. Also, the self-work you did earlier may have helped you see specific topics that you might have trouble talking about and you want to find someone to help address that issue. What adults are you going to invite with the overall leadership of the program? Remember leaders should be people that the young people respect and feel comfortable around.)
- End Results/Outcome: What should the young people walk away with at the end of the program? (This is probably the most important question to answer and can, at times be the most difficult.)

Make it an all-church program. Ask the Session (or your ruling body) to commission this program and lift it up as something important the church is doing. Again, this is important for you and for the program. It gives the program legitimacy, a program for everyone to be proud of, it becomes something that can be adopted or incorporated into other aspects of church life, and it becomes something that is sustainable.

Developing Your Program

There are some good curriculum options out there. As with all curriculums, they are at their best when you are critical of them and make sure the message fits with the "what should the youth walk away with" piece from above. What you might find you need to do is take a little from one place, a little from another, and a little from another to create something that is right for your church, your young people and families. While evaluating curriculums (or even creating your own) consider the following criteria:

- Does it meet the specification that you and your team faithfully laid out?
- Is it a program that is age appropriate or can it be adjusted to meet the needs of younger and older youth?
- Is it lasting, in that it teaches young people to make good choices and see oneself and one's sexuality in a positive way rather than just "sex is bad" and "don't do it?"
- Does it have a loving message? Sex and sexuality are something young people should feel good about and confident that the topic belongs in church and with God.
- Does the sex education program teach that the church is a safe place for questions about mistakes, fears, etc. regarding sex (and all things for that matter) and that God truly loves them? Sex is not something we keep from God, but something that God's light shines brightly in.
- Does it remind young people about God's goodness and grace? The love that they receive from God through Christ is an amazing gift and is just as much a part of their sexuality than anything else in their lives.
- Does it help youth see the benefits and reasons of waiting to engage in sex rather than just preaching to them?
- Does it go with them home, to school, with friends, and is it applicable in their daily lives?
- Does it have a family component? No matter how you structure your program, the young people will have more time with their parents than they will with you. So, it is important that the program has an element of parental participation and information. More information on this can be found in the Quicksheet entitled "Teaching the Talk: Helping Parents Faithfully Educate their Children about Sex".

Promoting Your Program

You have spent all this time working on developing a loving program that faithfully teaches young people to make good choices about sex and have a better understanding of their sexuality, so you definitely want people to attend. Here are some ideas to help you be successful:

- Start with a letter/email to the entire family that not only has information about where and when, but more importantly talks about why the church thinks this is an important topic and an overview of the program.
- Offer an informational meeting for parents and youth. This may be a new or uncomfortable topic for some families, so give them a chance to ask questions and provide clarification.
- Include information of the sex education program in church wide publications i.e., the bulletin or newsletter, so that everyone in the church is aware of the upcoming program.
- This will allow people to encourage others to participate and again reinforces that this is a church program not just a youth program.
- Start early. Show people how important this is by giving them dates and details as early as possible.
- Talk to the youth at your regular meeting about the program and your hopes for it. Give them examples of the topics to be discussed and what the experience will be like.
- Be honest about the fact that you know this is a difficult topic but take every opportunity to talk about why it is so important that youth get this faithful perspective about sex and their sexuality.

The Program

When the time finally arrives, you will be ready! You may be very nervous, you may still have some questions about how everything is going to go but remember the work you have done and the people who are supporting you in this effort.

Before you meet with the youth make sure you meet with all the adults participating. You want to be able to give the youth your full attention during the program and not worry about taking care of the adults working with you who may also be nervous. So, meet beforehand (preferably more than once) to make sure everyone knows what they are doing and their expectations. It is also important for everyone to know how to handle difficult questions and direct questions from the youth to the adults.

Dealing with situations of abuse. Another aspect of the program that all adults must understand is how they are going to handle situations where there is suspicion of abuse. While leading a good, loving, faithful program about sex, there is a chance that a young person is going to reveal (either intentionally or unintentionally) possible sexual abuse in his or her life. Hopefully, your church has a child safety policy that will help guide you through this difficult situation. If not, here are some important things to keep in mind:

- Do not ignore it. In most states if you work with children or youth, you are a mandated reporter, which means under the law you cannot ignore any suspicion of abuse.
- Do not get in a deep discussion about it in front of the group. Ask follow-up questions in private and be ready to listen.
- Do not promise to keep anything a secret. Remind the youth that your top priority is to make sure they are safe and to get the help they need. To do that there may be others you have to inform, but you can promise to be with them through the process and to be honest and clear about what your next steps are going to be.
- If it is appropriate, notify the young person's parent(s) or guardian.
- Notify the proper authorities in your state.
- Remember it is not your job to investigate.
- It is your job to be a loving, supporting, and a faithful presence in the life of the young person and their family as they deal with this difficult situation.
- You may want to find a counselor or some person of support that you can talk to freely and who can give you the support you will need to help this youth and their family.

The program may not go as you've planned. As a youth worker, you are familiar with things not going the way you have planned. When leading a program on sex, it is no different. What may be different is your anxiety level or your desire to “stick to the script”. Be prepared to know how you are going to deal with getting off topic. How are you going to guide the group back to the topic? Or you might be okay with the group taking the program in a direction that you did not plan. Regardless, remember the vision and return to the topic and the information you have set out to cover.

Evaluate the program. Make sure you leave time to allow the youth, families, and your adult helpers to evaluate the program. What did they like? What didn't they like? What message are they leaving with? What do they wish you would have done more? What is one thing that you learned that you did not expect coming into this experience? Questions like these will allow you to continue to fine tune the program and discover for yourself if the program is accomplishing what you and your team hoped it would. Also, be honest with yourself in terms of what you think worked and what didn't. Each offering of this program will allow you to make improvements, but you are never going to feel like you have enough time to do everything. And no one should expect you to!

Follow Up. After the program is over send some follow-up materials home so that families can continue the conversation. Remember you are just planting seeds that we hope will start to grow in a loving and supportive home. You can follow-up with the group yourself by making reference to the experience in other programs throughout the year by asking questions about sex and sexuality in the context of another program entirely. This helps the youth remember the lesson and also remember that something like sex is affected by how they live out their faith with their friends, how they feel when they are stressed, and the sacrifice Christ made for them. It is in the follow-up to a program like this that we begin to instill in the young people that a topic like sex does belong in church and is affected by many aspects of our faith.

Resources

Resources for leading sex education programs in the church vary widely in terms of how to teach the subject, what should be included, what should not be included, what the overall message should be, etc. Below is a list of resources that are no different. Find the ones that best fit the beliefs of your congregation, but also be open to learning something new. Remember you don't have to use everything that is in a curriculum, but also, don't dismiss things just because you are not comfortable with it on first read.

Curriculum:

Good Sex 2.0: A Whole-Person Approach to Teenage Sexuality and God- Jim Hancock & Kara Powell

Created By God – United Methodist Church

InFormed – Adolescent Development Resources; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Congregational Ministries Publishing Corporation.

<http://www.informedteens.org/INformed/index2.html>

The Gift of Sexuality – Steve Clapp

Other Resources:

Sex God – Rob Bell

Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenager – Chap Clark

When Kids Hurt: Help of Adults Navigating the Adolescent Maze: Chap Clark & Stave Rabey

A Sexual Youth Worker: A Youthworker Round Table –

<http://youthspecialties.com/articles/the-sexualyouth-pastor-a-youthworker-roundtable>

Christian Ethics in the Sexual Wilderness – Tony Compolo

<http://youthspecialties.com/articles/christian-ethics-in-the-sexual-wilderness>

Church Tries it Hand at Sex Education – Rachael Martin

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7867316>

Lessons for “Our Whole Lives”: Church based Sex-Ed – Amy Frykholm

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-05/lessons-our-whole-lives>

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