

Star Tribune

How to talk about sex? Families share

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The talk." There may be no surer way to send both kids and parents into a nervous sweat.

Much has been written from many perspectives on the how-tos of talking to kids about the physiology and morality of sex. This time, we wanted to give parents free rein to talk about what they've done, how their words were received, their missteps and recoveries, and to give kids a chance to share their views of how their parents did.

Although their views differ markedly, the four families that shared their stories have this much in common: love and respect for their kids and persistence when a given approach fails. It also was clear that the parents' background stories and life experiences had everything to do with how they approached the topic.

In the cases where the child was far enough removed from the experience, we included their perspectives, as well.

Here are their stories:

Parent: Coral Garner, St. Paul, co-founder, Ujima, a teen pregnancy prevention program.



Walking the talk
Laurie Harker
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Child: Christina Garner, 19, older of two girls.

Philosophy: "Parents miss the boat by talking at their kids and not necessarily talking to their kids and by not giving their children permission to talk about certain topics. Just tell them, if you have questions, you can always come to your mom or your dad to talk about things."

Misstep: Tried to approach her older daughter, Christina, too early. Rebuffed, she dropped the subject.

Opportunity: When Christina was 14, Garner learned that her daughter had told a health educator her mom had told her nothing about sex.

"I said, 'Honestly, tell me, do you think I've adequately prepared you to know what to do when it comes to sex?' She said, 'No, we've never talked about it.' . . . We just kind of started a dialogue that day with, 'Tell me, what are some things you'd like to have more information about that I can help you with?' That's how it started."

Christina's view: "When I was around 9 or 10, I didn't have any interest in boys, so I didn't want to know anything about it. . . . I don't think we got into any in-depth conversations until this past year, when I went off to college. I've been more open about it and said more things because I've matured, so I don't feel uncomfortable discussing it with my mom. I tell her pretty much everything."

Mom's moral message: "Make responsible choices. Know that you are mentally able to live with the decisions you make, that you have the maturity to handle the consequences, and also think about the values that you learn as a Christian, and live out those values."

Christina's moral message: Be responsible. If you're going to do something, have all the tools and things you need in place. Use all your resources, because you have a lot of resources at your disposal."

Resources: A program called "Making the Connections: A Day of Discovery for Mothers & Daughters," a retreat sponsored by Planned Parenthood. On the Web: www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org/

Parent: Rick Thompson, Lino Lakes.

Child: Lea Thompson, 17, fourth in a blended family of six children.

Dad's philosophy: "I said from a young age, 'I love you and you don't have to do anything to be loved.' "

Misstep: When his older kids were at home, Thompson didn't establish the kind of trusting relationship to engage them in a dialogue about sexuality. "The values I've wanted to teach them haven't changed. The biggest factor was where I was at, and as I realized the importance of talking to my kids, I think there was always the same fear, that awkwardness of talking."

Opportunity: His daughter was 13; his son was 15. "I asked them, 'Are you ready to talk?' They'd say yes, and that's it." Using gender-specific books grounded in Christianity and abstinence, Thompson arranged regular coffee shop outings with his son and daughter to discuss their weekly readings.

Lea's view: "I was actually extremely comfortable talking to my dad about it because I'm extremely close with my dad. . . . We definitely have conversations every once in a while, not just [about] sex, but also relationships."

Dad's moral message: "I was raised as a Christian. The values I saw my grandparents have and talked about, and my parents talked about, I have embraced those beliefs also."

Lea's moral message: "My dad gave me a ring, it's a gold ring and it has a heart and a cross in the middle, and it's called my purity ring. It's not that I look at this when I'm tempted, but it's my physical reminder that I made a promise to myself

and my future husband and God that I'm not going to cross any boundaries that would compromise my purity on my wedding night."

Resources: The books "And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity," by Dannah Gresh (Moody Publishers, 2004, \$12.99) and "Who Moved the Goalpost?: Seven Winning Strategies in the Sexual Integrity Gameplan," by Bob Gresh and Dannah Gresh (Moody Publishers, 2001, \$12.99).

Parent: Yvonne Cournoyer, Minneapolis, director of a child sex abuse prevention program, mother of a 6-year-old girl.

Philosophy: "It's important to recognize that sex is a part of life, even for kids, so I try not to make it be a separate thing that's a big conversation, but it's more something that it's comfortable to talk about."

Misstep: When her daughter was 5, and getting ready to go to a summer day camp program, Cournoyer thought it was a good time to talk about good touch-bad touch. "I said, 'Honey, one of your counselors would maybe want to hold you on their lap or hug you or kiss you. . . .' She looked at me and said, 'Mo-ooooom!' "

Opportunity: "She likes stories and scenarios, so I started presenting information that way. . . . A piece of it is choosing what to present at what point, and trying to present information in a way that is serious information, but in a playful way of talking through these different situations. We did it during a walk. If I sat down and looked straight at her, I think I would send the wrong message, like 'This is something you really need to be worried about.' I wanted her to understand that this is something she can talk to me or other adults about, and I wanted her to understand from the get-go that this wasn't anything that would be her fault."

Mom's moral message: "To little kids, especially, the concept of rules makes sense. They understand rules, so you say that [because] some people don't

know the rules, it's important when we know when they're doing something [inappropriate], so we can help them learn the rules."

Resources: On the Web, www.noplacelikehome.org. Book: "From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children - from Infancy to Middle School," by Debra Haffner (Newmarket Press, 2004, \$14.95).

Parent: Raquel Counihan, stay-at-home mom, Minneapolis, mother of twin 9-year-old girls.

Philosophy: "If they're getting information from friends, I want to make sure it's accurate information."

Misstep: "It doesn't come up, which is what I'm struggling with. I'm all ready to answer the questions they would ask and give them the answers they need, but they're not asking. Everyone I know is struggling with this. We talk about it all the time, and nobody has great ideas."

Opportunity: She's still waiting, although she has seized teaching moments when they occur. Once, a boy who had been accused of molesting younger kids moved in next door to a playmate. "A friend lent us a book, 'It's My Body.' I read it to them, and they were really embarrassed. We talked about good touch-bad touch, and they listened, but they were mortified. . . . Obviously, this is a more difficult conversation and I'm concerned that the lines of communication aren't as good and as open as they are on other things, and I worry about missing my opportunity."

Mom's moral message: "I want the opportunity to talk to them about my values, making sure you're having safe sex when you're doing it, and that you're not doing it until you're ready."

Resources: The book "It's So Amazing! A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families," by Robie Harris (Candlewick Press, 2004, \$10.99).

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