

Talking with my children about sex without shame

I wanted to give them better than what I had. It wasn't easy.

by [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue



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It was 2012, and I was on the phone with the organizers of my denomination's National Youth Gathering, which would be held later that summer at the Superdome

in New Orleans and at which I would be speaking on the main stage. I mused, “I wish I had a Magic 8 Ball that could offer me the answer to one question: How many STDs and unplanned pregnancies have occurred in the last 25 years as a result of sexual contact between teenagers at the ELCA’s National Youth Gatherings?”

Now, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is one of the most progressive-minded denominations in the country. We ordain gay folks and have teaching statements on the sins of mass incarceration and global warming. I think of us as being a church that embraces reality.

“So how great would it be,” I said, “if our denomination’s National Youth Gathering had a place in the resource area where adults stood by, ready to provide sound information about sexual health?” So many of these kids come from areas of the country where the only information available to them is about abstinence. This could be their only chance to get the guidance they need. I added, “If you guys can’t provide these resources to the youth of our church, my own congregation would be willing to . . . you know, at our expense.” I paused, but they were pretty quiet on the other end of the line.

A no-brainer, right? The reply came weeks later.

“We talked about it. It’s a great idea, but the parents wouldn’t stand for it.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about that. What, exactly, would the parents not stand for? Was it the fact that some of their teenagers were sexually active, something the ELCA had nothing to do with? Or the fact that the church would dare to acknowledge it and help to ensure the health and safety of their kids? Statistically, it’s unlikely that rules against providing guidance on sexual health do anything to keep teenagers from having sex. In a study published in the June 2017 *Journal of Pediatrics*, researchers found that teen pregnancy rates are 40–50 percent higher than the national average in areas of Texas where abstinence-only education is the law.

So I started wondering: What is it within parents that gets in the way of us embracing reality? Do we honestly believe that Jesus was as shocked and dismayed about sex as the church seems to be? Really?

If we’re honest with ourselves, we could very quickly answer why parents and the church have so often obsessed over teenagers and sex: fear.

Yes, sex has its dangers. It would be foolish to suggest otherwise. Obviously, as parents, we are afraid of our children making a temporary choice with a permanent consequence, a moment of pleasure followed by a lifetime of sickness or premature parenthood. And more simply, we don't want our children to experience heartbreak or use sex the way I have used sex at different points in my own life—namely, as a way to medicate loneliness or to feel worthy. These are all reasonable fears.

But maybe I as a parent also fear the *mystery* of sex, because I know how I myself have been swallowed whole by desire, how I have lost myself in a connection with my lover in a way that is terrifying, a way that I cannot control or even define. I know that when I see my lover, something within me uncoils. That which has been contained—by social convention and protective psychology and basic clothing for most of my adult life and most of my waking hours—quickness from within. It is a wildness, part velvet, part forest fire. A wildness that desires in equal parts to consume and caress. Desire is tricky. It is destruction and insistence and risk and the goddamn Easter bunny, all at once. It makes every edge blur like a thumb run over a charcoal line.

Sex can be procreative, a way of creating new life. It can be intimate, a way for love to be expressed between partners. It can be revelatory, a way in which we discover ourselves and another. It can be boring, mind-blowing, or regrettable. It can be a beautiful aspect of human flourishing, and it can be a humiliating aspect of human degradation. It can be the safest place we can go or the most dangerous thing we can do. It can be obligation or joy. It can be deadly. It can be life.

Given all of this, maybe it makes sense that we reach for some rules. Rules can be helpful, of course. Society has to function, and humans can be pretty horrible to each other. We steal each other's shit and try to hide money from the government so that we don't have to pay our share. We simply cannot rely on everyone being good. This is why we have laws—whether passed by government or intuited through social norms.

But religious law can never keep us as safe as we think it will. For instance, telling teenagers—those wild, beautiful, insane beings filled with hormones—that they must abstain from sex and never think about sex is seldom effective. And even when it does work, there can be harsh consequences. When our teenagers do manage to shut down their own sexual responses and desires, they can be left later in their lives trying to connect frayed wires, strangers to themselves as sexual beings.

The main thing accomplished through these efforts is that adults feel like we are *doing* something. We think we are protecting them, keeping them safe from harm, keeping them pure. And these are noble instincts. But what we're more likely doing is projecting our own bullshit onto our kids—the fear of our own desires, the peer pressure and cultural norms of our religious community. We are stunting our children by withholding the tools and the wisdom they need for a healthy sexual future, or we are sending them straight to their peers or the Internet for guidance.

In 1979, my mother handed me a mint-green book, *Wonderfully Made*, the cover of which bore the cartoonish image of four brown-haired males on the top and four blonde females on the bottom, shown from the youngest to the oldest, from the smallest to the biggest. At every age and size, the white boy holds a football in his arm, but only the youngest girl on the cover is jumping rope; the older females walk empty-handed. A parade of gender norms, marching into my life with a one-size-fits-all message of “God’s plan” for sex and marriage. She told me to let her know if I had any questions. This was the extent of the “sex talk” I received from my parents.

I wanted to do better when I had kids. And yet, when it was my turn to have the sex talk with my own, I had no idea how to do it, either. Here, have a look:

2006: I mean to have “the talk” with Harper.

2007: I mean to have “the talk” with Harper.

2008: I mean to have “the talk” with Harper and Judah.

2009: The kids’ dad and I buy them each a book, hand it to them, and tell them to come to us if they have questions.

For all my big talk now about the things we can teach our children about sex, *this* was the extent of the sex talk I gave my kids when they were young.

Maybe you, too, defaulted to this with your own kids, even though you wanted to do better. If so, you are not alone. Maybe you felt like I did: afraid. I was afraid of being uncomfortable and of making my kids uncomfortable. Afraid of telling them too much too soon. It’s hard to embrace the sexuality of our kids.

I wanted to do a better job than my parents did in talking about sex.

But by the time my kids were teenagers, I was determined to do better. And I did, somewhat. It wasn't easy. But it also wasn't impossible.

The year Harper was a high school senior, she and I were driving to the grocery store when she looked up at me and said, "Justin has condoms, Mom. I just thought you should know." This was the matter-of-fact way that my daughter informed me she was having sex with her boyfriend.

I tried to not freak out. After all, she was older than I'd been when I started having sex.

"Can I stay the night at his house Friday?" she asked. "His mom is fine with it, and she'll be home and everything." Harper had been hanging out at their house a lot already, and I trusted her. But suddenly I couldn't access the forward-thinking, sex-positive woman who wanted teenagers to be given sex education at a youth event.

It took a while to answer. I had so many thoughts to sort through. I thought about how I loved Justin. He was sweet and quirky, with his red hair and canvas sneakers covered in images of dinosaurs and his backpack that looked like Captain America's shield. He was a-dork-able, and a really good kid.

And yet my first thought about her staying the night was . . . no. But if I said no, I thought, Harper might just defy me and do it anyway. Maybe she would do as I'd done, and follow her heart and not her mother. All because I couldn't accept the reality of her developing life. If I said yes, then at least we were communicating, and I would know where she really was that night.

Still, I thought, *What if people find out that I am letting my 18-year-old daughter sleep over at her boyfriend's house? That's just trashy. I might as well buy her a carton of Camels and half a dozen scratch tickets.*

But I didn't say that. Instead, I looked at Harper and said, "Go ahead. And thanks for asking me."

"We need milk" was all she said as we walked into the store. She was fine.

I was a mess.

We pulled up to our house after loading the car with groceries for the week, and I turned off the ignition and looked at her. I wanted more for her than just a green

light from her mom, more than consent. She deserved *concern*.

“I want you to love sex, sweetie,” I said to her as earnestly as I could manage while still sounding matter-of-fact about it. “I want you to be comfortable in your body and learn what it desires and how to communicate that to your lovers. So start that process now. Know your body. Speak up for what you want or don’t want. That will serve you your whole life.” When I said this, I almost choked up.

I took a breath, holding back tears. She looked me straight in the eye. No shame, not even embarrassment. It gave me the strength to continue. “I want you to choose well, and to treat your lovers with respect and concern. And I hope for your faith to be a part of your sexuality and vice versa. Also, you know that high you feel with Justin? It’s the most amazing feeling in the world. But I want you to understand that if it goes badly or if and when you break up, there may be a commensurate low. And it will feel awful. But that doesn’t mean something is wrong. It’s just inescapable, and it will teach you important things about yourself.” I thought for a second. “And one more thing,” I finally said. “Pee afterward. I don’t want you to get a UTI.”

She laughed and did the typical teenager eye roll. “I knooooow!” she joked.

“I love you, baby. And I trust you.”

Eighteen months later, in the summer of 2018, my son, Judah, spent a week away from home with 30,000 other teenagers at the ELCA’s Youth Gathering in Houston. There in the brightly lit, high-ceilinged exhibition hall, amid the World Hunger Appeal display, the acoustic music stage, and the pizza vendors, was a small table from a little church in Denver staffed by professional sex educators.

They’d said yes this time.

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This article is adapted from [Shameless: A Sexual Reformation](#) © 2019 by Nadia Bolz-Weber. Published by Convergent, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “My fear of having the ‘sex talk.’”