Sexuality and the Christian Family

Part 2 of 2: How Do I Talk to My Teen About Sex?
with C. Gary Barnes, Charles W. Dickens, Darrell L. Bock, and Debby Wade
Release Date: August 2013
Darrell Bock: Now your remark triggers something else in my mind, and that is, parents sometimes have the idea they should make every effort to control the environment of the child, and I'm sitting here going, "Ha, does that work?" and even more basic, "Is that realistic?"

Gary Barnes: Well, even research shows us that that's not. It's kind of the parallel experience of, you know, never being exposed to any germs so that you never get sick. I mean there's a natural inoculation.

Darrell Bock: Find that place, yeah.

Gary Barnes: Now there's always a balance that has to be struck on that, but it does kind of get to the heart of it if I could just fully control this and keep them in an incubator, then they'll cook well, you know. That's just not going to be how that works.

Darrell Bock: They're going to have to learn how to cope with what is there and around them. Okay, you said there were two things. So you said the formula. What was the second one?

Gary Barnes: Yeah, the second thing was don't base your outcomes on premature measurements. And so in other words, it's very, very possible if you just look at the statistics that by the time boys and girls are 15 years old, one-quarter of them have had sexual intercourse. By the time they're 18 years old, two-thirds of them have. After they're at an age of finishing the first year of college, then three-quarters of them.

And so people aren't getting married at these ages, so we're talking about the high frequency of premarital sex. And so if your child is in that category, which is a high, high number –

Darrell Bock: And you're taking care of a question that was coming next.

Gary Barnes: – don't say, it's all lost, it's all a total failure see, because this ongoing conversation that you've had with them, all of this cultivating over time is still in the works as well. And with God being a redemptive God, he's going to use all of that. So don't judge outcomes too early, even when all seems lost.
Darrell Bock: And these statistics that you're talking about, the numbers – I don't know – but I take it that the difference between kids who grow up in a secular environment or a non-church environment and a church environment don't vary enough to where you don't have to face this question and think about it.

Gary Barnes: That's right.

Darrell Bock: I tried to say that as gently as I could.

Chip Dickens: Right on the money. So that's a whole other podcast as to how that can be dealt with. But there's a sense in which you shouldn't feel that your child is inoculated simply because they're in environments oftentimes that are healthy, that that is no automatic protection either – particularly if you step back and let someone else do it.

Chip Dickens: I think it's just good to keep in mind that some of these life events and life movement, it just can't be engineered and controlled as much as we would like to be that way. I think it kind of relieves our own anxiety to think that we could manage all that stuff and control it all, and predict outcomes, and it's just not that way. And it makes life a lot more interesting and unpredictable, but it doesn't mean that we give up.

And I love that message that there's a perseverance, there's this, "I'm going to stick with it with my kids regardless of whether the wheels are wobbling all over the place on this thing."

Darrell Bock: Now can there be a danger in too much control?

Chip Dickens: Yeah, yeah, I think so. You know, this will be true across the board, not just in the area of teenagers’ sexuality, but you know, good parenting has that element that there's structure. There are expectations, but it's one where kids – especially teenage kids and young adults – have room to be able to really manage their own lives in a safe environment.
But there's a great deal of warmth and openness on the part of parents that can go along with that structure, so they don't have to be mutually exclusive. You don't have to be someone who controls and has tons of rules and is choking the life out of your kids, and yet is cold and distant. But you don't have to be someone who's emotionally warm and are my kid’s best friend, and I'm permissive and we don't have any rules.

**Darrell Bock:** My thinking of parenting is that you really are preparing a child to live on their own, and so if that's the case, the more you make decisions for them, particularly the older they get, the worst preparation you are preparing them for, because you're not preparing them for it. They aren't learning to think for themselves and wrestle with things and that kind of thing.

**Chip Dickens:** And I think that approach, I think people kind of intuitively, that resonates with them, but it's really hard in this area of sexuality to actually implement that approach.

**Debby Wade:** But you know when we look at the four types of parenting that there's negligence, there's permissive – that’s too permissive – or there’s authoritarian or authoritative. And so when we look at teaching them about healthy sex, we don't want to be negligent, and we don't want to be so permissive that there's no boundaries, and we don't want to be authoritarian that everything's controlled, but authoritative of helping them to set healthy boundaries – parenting that we first set healthy boundaries so they understand healthy boundaries.

And then, again, with that, educating and equipping that they're empowered to decide where they want keep boundaries or where they want to move them, but making sure that they're making healthy decisions for themselves. And so I think of looking at it in the form of the types of parenting that it's helped that we want to be authoritative.

**Darrell Bock:** Now just to complete the loop, we've talked about child and we've talked about teenager. Here's a question that I think oftentimes we don't think perhaps enough about or much about, and that is, what's the role of a parent for a child who has gotten married and who's entered into this brave new world, if I can say it that way, and now is engaging?
I mean do you come alongside as a friend, do you engage them, do you keep an open ear, do you let the child who's now grown up and is an adult determine how that interaction takes place? What's the role of a parent after a child has become a spouse and maybe even a parent themselves?

Gary Barnes: Yeah, we're in that stage right now. Four kids, 27 to 32.

Darrell Bock: That's where we are.

Gary Barnes: You know, I think for them to feel like you're always approachable for anything, and that there's not going to be a rejection or a judgement. There's always going to be truth, but there's always acceptance. And so for them to just have that sense that there's really not anything I can't bring to mom and dad, even at this age is a thing that we really want to try to cultivate and keep alive for them.

Debby Wade: And, again, kind of that from the womb to the tomb, that if those conversations have started early, and they've remained in natural conversations through the puberty years, and then the adolescent years, and the single adult years, then that those are conversations then that continue even in adult-to-adult relationship with our parents. And so if it's, you know, preparing for having children or struggling with infertility, that you're still that parent that kids can come to, even adult kids; that you're still askable, still approachable, and you know, hopefully on the receiving end, you're still teachable.

Darrell Bock: Well, I think that's an important question. It also may suggest that there is the potential for – if I can say this – a real payoff having the conversation all along the way, because if you've built those bridges well when the child was a child or when the child was a teenager, then you end up actually with a very mature and healthy relationship with your child when then grow up. And that's very valuable and very precious to have and be able to experience.
Gary Barnes: You know, the thing I would add, Darrell, is – Kathy and I are kind of talking about this too. At this stage of they're being young adults, we also have a new opportunity with them, and that is, we're relating more in a peer relationship even though we're not peers, and there's a greater opportunity to talk about our personal failures in life, and to maybe fill in the blanks a little more on our story that we wouldn't have done when they were younger, and to let them have the sense that everybody's in the struggle and that it's okay to talk about that, and that we want to encourage and support one another.

And we would expect you as, you know, young marrieds and young parents to have these struggles too, and that you would feel free to have conversation with –

Darrell Bock: So kind of helping them create room to have – to get to issues, perhaps, before they really super serious.

Gary Barnes: Yes. You're making space for that conversation.

Debby Wade: I remember when my parents celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary and they went back to the same cabin that they had gone to on their honeymoon. And, you know, I was single, working on my Masters and they were returning from the trip, and I was talking to my mom and I said, "So how was it?" She said, "Oh, I wish I'd known 30 years ago what I know now," you know.

And, you know, I just loved it that she could be that open and honest and fun. And I know so many people have this concept of, "Oh, my gosh, you don't think of your parents having sex." But I have never thought that, because from early on, it was always presented, again, as something good and healthy and wonderful.

And – I know I have this permission from them – but, you know, my father is 82 and my mother's 77, and they still enjoy the precious gift, and are able to, as adults, are able to share and have that kind of conversation, and I just love that, you know, and that they feel open about that, and that we can have those conversations.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, we've kind of walked through life with children, let me shift gears here and go to difficult issues. And really, this is kind of the X question. You can put any X in the slot that you want, although, obviously, what the X is might impact how you deal with this.
But let's talk about in general, you hit an area and you hit a wall – if I can say it that way – whether it's a child who is going to have a baby, or whatever it is – and in this X thing happens, what general advice do you have when the child ends up not going down the path that you hoped for, and there's this terrific disappointment and sometimes a sense of failure, etcetera. What advice do you have for people who find themselves in that situation?

**Gary Barnes:** You know, I would go back to, if you just say, how should we even think about sex education, before X or after X? And I think that can really help a lot, because if we think of it first and foremost as primarily about character development and not just getting the right biological information, or even scriptural information. I mean it's about internalizing that for character development.

Whether it's before X or after X, you still have that opportunity. That's always the opportunity that we can say, "Okay, so how do we grow here? And given where we are right now, how do we grow?"

**Debby Wade:** And I think one of the things, if we're wanting to instill in our kids grace and mercy, and the grace and mercy part of God, the redemptive part of God, then the time to be able to demonstrate that to our kids is if they are going through a time that X has happened and whatever that is, and if it didn't play out the way that we had taught or instill, then it's still an opportunity for parents too show and demonstrate grace and mercy, and continue to teach that there's going to be a redemptive piece in this.

And then I think coming back to what we talked about a moment ago, community in the church, that you reach and seek out supportive friends to say, "Here's what we're dealing with," instead of staying in shame and embarrassed and feeling like, "Oh, my gosh, this is happening to us. We can't let our Christian friends know.” That it is the Christian friends, the church friends hopefully that you turn to to say, "This is what we're going through, and, oh, we so need your support and your prayers, and come alongside us." And that's really when the church really gets to participate in being grace giving and mercy giving and redemptive.

**Chip Dickens:** Sometimes I find, Darrell, in some of the counseling courses where we're training counselors how to be, you know, with their clients, and this idea of empathy and how do you put yourself in their shoes and feel what they feel. And a lot of times, students will go, "Well, but I don't agree with what my client is doing."
And so we use this phrase a lot of time that empathy is not the same thing as endorsement; that sometimes as Christians, I think we hold back and we pull our lives back or our hearts back, or that warmth or acceptance and empathy, because we don't want to be mistakenly endorsing some kind of behavior that's gone out of bounds.

But I think it's good for us as Christians to know that those are two completely different separate operations that we can be totally empathetic and totally with people, and not necessarily – that doesn't mean that we're endorsing or advocating for a certain disaster or position or behavior. And the greatest model for that is Christ. I mean Christ came to us while we were still sinners. It wasn't like he came to us because he embraced or endorsed our sin.

**Darrell Bock:** Now that you're good, I'm going to save you.

**Debby Wade:** Right.

**Chip Dickens:** Honestly, one of my favorite Scriptures is where he touches the leper before he's healed. I mean there's just something so powerful about that. And as parents and as a community of Christians, we can be empathetic. We can take the risk of joining with people who we love deeply and can communicate that without ever feeling like we have to compromise some kind of standard or position or biblical principle.

**Darrell Bock:** You know, I love that you bring up the leper, because you talked about Jesus, and, of course, I work in the Gospels. And one of the things that's interesting is that the point of that, one of the points of that passage is that the presence of the potential for cleanliness is greater than the potential for the presence of uncleanness.

**Chip Dickens:** Interesting.

**Debby Wade:** Wow; wow.

**Chip Dickens:** That's great.
Darrell Bock: And so, you know, whereas the thinking was most people had the other thought, that the unclean stains the clean. And so this is the other way around. So the opportunity is to touch uncleanness with cleanness, and hopefully engage in such a way that the direction is impacted. If you step back and do nothing, or if you simply shame, then there's no other place to go, and you're stuck. So it's an interesting –

Chip Dickens: What a beautiful picture.

Darrell Bock: So we have that same role as parents with our kids after X. I love the term that Tim Keller gave called "receptive grace". And so it's about me moving towards the other -- "other", whatever it is that separates me or makes me different -- if it's a behavior or whatever. It's moving towards receiving and grace, not based on choices of the other. And just as Chip was saying, it's not about endorsing. And so we get confused on like tolerance, and so the idea is this is like way beyond tolerance. This is actually, "At my cost, I'm moving towards someone and I'm receiving and embracing them."

Chip Dickens: It's way better than tolerance. Tolerance is like shooting too low. This is way better than just tolerating someone.

Darrell Bock: So I'm going to concretize this a little bit, and it also introduces another scenario that I want to talk about, because we've talked about, you know, what happens if X happens. But before we get to X, we have the scenario of, how do I help my child now -- I'm thinking particularly also of teenagers -- with the issue of choices in a world in which signals are being sent to them that are saying things to them like, "That's okay, that's okay, that's okay." That may not be okay in certain circumstances, but that certainly is, and those okays are things that the Church has said, "Now wait a minute. It may not be okay."

So how do you help with that tension? Because that is a tension that every child who lives goes through in terms of what they're hearing. And I'm back to the sex saturated culture. How do you help a child live in a culture that is sex saturated?

Debby Wade: Go ahead, Chip. Dive in.
Well, honestly, what I want to have happen is I want for Gary and Deb – I almost want for you guys to like let us eavesdrop in on the conversation that you guys have in the human sex class where everything is just talked about. I mean it's just right down to mechanics and logistics and plumbing.

Not in a biological sense only, but in a, "What do we think about this? What does the Church think about oral sex? What about anal sex? What about any of these things?"

It's like where are we going have that conversation? So I almost want to like go, "Okay, guys, I want to carry this over." But it's not my show, so…

That was done so politely. That's the ball going into the post and coming back to the guard. I don't want it, I don't want it.

Yeah. So have the conversation. Too bad time's running out right now. But for parents to just say, "I'm in on the conversation, I'm just there, and let's keep having this conversation." But you have the conversation in a non-controlling way.

In a context where if you've had the conversation all along, this is the beauty of the model of having the conversation all along. If you had the conversation all along, when those situations surface and pop up, when those teaching moments come, they come naturally, they're a part of the relationship. Whereas, if that groundwork hasn't been laid, then it's a little harder to get there. It shows the importance of working with the right frame.

But, of course, we're always faced with the choices people face and that kind of thing. So do you just dive in? I mean – you know.

You know, here's just what's kind of coming to my mind, so I'm just going to go with this. You know, I think, again, kids love for parents to be authentic and real. And if parents always come across as they have the answer and know the answer and all that, they don't seem very approachable.

But if kids make statements or there's an experience, X comes along; for a parent to just look and go, "Wow, that's a good question. I'm so glad you're asking that." Or, "This is tough, but I'm glad we're willing to deal with this together. And let's look up some stuff on this together, let's look up scriptural backing, let's look up what are the experts saying. Let's go to a Christian sex therapy website and see what they're talking about."
Or for a parent to even say, "That's a really good question, let me look up some things on that and I want to come back to you." And, again, age appropriate – if the child's old enough, "You look up some stuff and then let's come back and talk about it."

But I think kids love it when a parent goes, "I don't have all the answers and I'm willing to kind of do some research on that myself."

**Darrell Bock:** So let's work through it together is kind of what you're saying.

**Debby Wade:** Yeah. And taking a moment, whether it's a reality show of Jersey Shores or Teen Mom or whatever, instead of just coming in and going, "Don't watch that stuff! I can't believe you're interested in that!" Sitting down and just processing through it morally, spiritually, culturally, "What is this saying? What's this doing? What is the intrigue in this? What's the struggle that they're dealing with?"

But I think so often – again, maybe based out of fear – you know, parents want to maybe control too much and back away and say, "You can't watch that, that's trash!" you know. "Can't deal with that. We're not going to talk about that in here!" "Well, where do I talk about it then?"

**Darrell Bock:** Well, what happens is they get up and they go to their neighbors' house to where they're watching the show together.

**Debby Wade:** With a permissive parent saying, "Hey, isn't this cool."

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, that's right. And I think kids live in very – I think we've given kids a very difficult world in which to function with Christian values, and they're faced constantly with choices, and some of the choices are not even choices that are made, it's just in your face, you know.

I find myself watching television with my grandkids, and a commercial will come on and I will go, "I didn't ask for that," you know. And, boom, all of a sudden, I'm in a place that I really don't want to be in, but there we are. And so it's so, almost omnipresent that figuring out how to help your kids work through that I think is a very, very important thing to consider.

Well, we may run a little over time, so don't get nervous about the time. There's one other question I definitely wanted to put on the table that I wanted to hear you all address and it's this question. And you'll like this question, because it relates to your vocation, and that is, "When is it time to say, 'I need help.'"
When do you say – and I know at one level, the answer is, "We always all need help. We all need the support of what the church can give." But what I'm asking is, when do you think you'd advise someone to say, "You need to really seek some professional counseling," because this may be beyond what you're able to deal with.

Gary Barnes: The short answer to that question is, "Before you think." And we even see this in research for marital therapy. Most couples are coming to marital therapy seven years too late. But this would apply across the board for any topic is we tend to think that to reach out for help is going to highlight my inadequacy; whereas, actually, that needs to be reframed to say, "Wow, I'm so adequate that I'm reaching outside of myself for support."

Darrell Bock: I'm seeing the world as it really is and dealing with it realistically.

Gary Barnes: Yes.

Chip Dickens: It's actually a more mature, healthy perspective to go, "I can't figure this out without somebody helping me with it."

Darrell Bock: And it's an evidence of being, not just mature, but free from the immaturity to say, "Hey, man, I've got some gaps here. I need to do something about this. This would be a good thing for me to do something about this."

Debby Wade: I think so many people think counseling is for crisis, so you wait till everything's in crisis and chaos, and then you go in. Well then you spend so many hours unpacking the crisis and chaos before you ever get to the real issue. So I really do encourage.

I think, you know, when I do premarital – because I can't go buy gifts and all that – I offer for anybody I do premarital with, I say, "Any time after your marriage, I'll do one free marital session, and I recommend you come in within the first three months, but anytime."

And so I've had people call from three months to three years. The ones at three years, they're already in crisis, of course. The ones that come in three months afterward are not in crisis, and we're just maintaining.
Darrell Bock: But if you see them on the honeymoon, you know you got a good deal.

Debby Wade: If they call on the honeymoon, I know they get it, you know. So you know what? I think for parents and kids that are struggling, that if there's tension building up, then let's just say, "Let's go in and get a third party input here, and that we can just sit and process this through."

And if it's a couple – again, if there's just some struggle, "Let's go in this before it becomes a crisis." What we're finding with couples who struggle with vaginismus, where consummation can't take place, then they end up, you know, usually five years before they're in therapy. And you can only imagine the –

Gary Barnes: Added problems that get piled on top of that.

Debby Wade: The tension and the struggle, and the fear of feeling inadequate on both parties.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, "I'm never going to have a child."

Debby Wade: You know, "I'm not going to have a child. We're not ever going to be able to have the intimacy. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you?" And if they'll come in in the beginning, oh, the prognosis of working through that is so positive.

Chip Dickens: Do you guys notice in your work where you're doing a lot of professional work around sexual issues, do you notice that maybe that initial question like that, or initial ask for help is maybe not you guys, but it's maybe more like a primary care physician or their OB/GYN, and it's like, okay, it's safer there to kind of say, "Hey, I've got maybe" or “I'm curious," and then it ends up being a referral, or encouragement, even from the medical professionals that says, "Hey, you guys need some support, or you need some help, or we need to do some reparative relational stuff, not just medication or physical things."

Gary Barnes: Right.

Debby Wade: And sometimes from pastors and youth pastors, that they'll hear and say, "Here's someone we'd like to refer you to."
The Table Podcast: Sexuality and the Christian Family

*Darrell Bock:* Yeah, and I know we stress in our pastoral care with pastors, you know, that they oftentimes they may be the first stop, but they need to develop the ability to really recognize when they're out of their own league, and really need to draw on someone who is able to – is trained to deal with what it is that they're facing.

*Gary Barnes:* A key thing in that first stop though, Darrell, is that whether it's a pastor, a physician, or even a lay person in the church, research shows how important it is for that first stop person to feel very comfortable inviting sexual questions; because otherwise, people are there, but then they decide to talk about it, because the invitation –

*Darrell Bock:* Right. They handle it like the church handles the topic.

*Gary Barnes:* Yeah. "Oh, just don't do it.” Okay. So I got your message, okay.

*Darrell Bock:* Yeah, yeah. Okay. Well this has been very, very helpful. I'm going to let you – I have one more round of what we're going to do. We've focused on sexuality in the context of the family. I would like at some point in the future to come back, because I think the second obvious topic that's on the table is sexuality in the context of marriage – just the spouses themselves without the added factor of how we deal with this in the context of family and children. And also a very, very obviously important topic.

And so I'm doing this publically. I'm punching my card and saying, "Please, will you come back and consider that?"

But before we do that, I would like for each of you to say – you've heard the conversation that we've had now for about an hour. Is there anything that we haven't said that you think we should have said; or, is there anything you'd like to highlight as you summarize what it is that we've talked about?

*Debby Wade:* One of the things that we probably haven't talked about that would maybe be one of the big X's is if teens come home, or single adults come home and they're telling their parent they think they're gay or homosexual. And I think that is something that we're really going to have to face and deal with in helping parents to not have the shock factor or the, "Oh, my gosh, you're kicked out of the house and you can't live here anymore," response.
Of learning how to walk through that, loving well, and extending grace, and again, being able to have that conversation on the table to be able to talk through it, and not let fear keep parents from talking to their kids about it. And then that would probably be one of the issues that I think counseling would be a great – just when it's first brought out – that counseling be a part of it in the very beginning.

**Darrell Bock:** That you don't even blink. This is going to require support and help.

**Debby Wade:** Yes. And I can say I am so thankful I've had the privilege of working with so many parents who have wanted that option for their kids. And some of it has come certainly, "I'm going to bring my kid; you need to fix them." But most of the time, it's been, "I don't know how to deal with this, and we want them to have the best support." And I have just loved that. And the kids and the young adults have I think really so appreciated their parents’ support.

**Darrell Bock:** And oftentimes the scenario when that does happen is that you're going to want to interact with both the child and the parents, and not just the child. "I'm sending you to them," you know. It's a very important part of the understanding what's involved.

**Chip Dickens:** You know, the other thing I would add is kind of the message that we've been trying to really challenge and champion for parents to kind of take ownership and to take the initiative with talking with their kids about it. I think we've kind of said this, but I would really implore pastors to do the same sort of thing; because in the same way that a parent would invite that conversation with their kids, pastors can be doing that from the pulpit in lots of other ways to take the initiative and to give that green light for that conversation to be had, even in the context of the broader community. And so how that gets played out, I know it'll be different from congregation to congregation, and I know some churches really have taken that step.

**Darrell Bock:** Yes, some churches do it; other churches say, "Well, we're getting ready to talk about X, and so everyone under age Y is – you know, you're headed somewhere else."

**Chip Dickens:** But modeling that good conversation, even in the local community.
**Darrell Bock:** That, I'd say, is a good thing to think about in terms of how the church comes alongside the families and supports them in creating this conversational environment so that it's not just between the parent and the kids, but there's a wider Christian world in which they're seeing this conversation play itself out with many points of potential contact as opposed to just the parents – which actually can be reinforcing hopefully, in terms of how it works itself out. Gary?

**Gary Barnes:** You know, as I think about what we've talked about today, I would say my top three takeaways from our conversation would be, first and foremost in the family, sex education is about character formation. Secondly, we want to build this big picture view of, "Celebrate it, and don't worship it." And then the third thing would be that in a true celebration of it, it's going to enhance my worship of God. It points me back to something bigger than myself.

**Darrell Bock:** You know, and I'm glad we've come and landed here, because we started here in one sense, and then we went through all the nitty gritty, and we've come back to the point that there is something being modeled about intimacy, about communication, about the preciousness of what's going on. And my own sense is that sexuality is viewed as something precious and special, that works against the idea of making it, if I can say it, common and cheap. And one of the things that I think is confusing the way culture handles sex is they say, "It's wonderful and it's for everybody," you know, "in any form and in any expression." And then what you lose is the preciousness of it and the uniqueness of what it is it was designed to be. And so we take a good thing and we end up distorting it. And in the distortion, we actually – the distortion doesn't lead to a participation, the distortion leads to a loss. It leads to a loss of something and a devaluing that actually – the culture claims it may elevate sex, but in fact, it's a devaluing of it, a very, very important element of it.

Well, I want to thank you all for this first conversation that we've had on this topic, and I've enjoyed it and learned a lot in listening, and my hope is is that those of us who've been eavesdropping on our table conversation about sex feel like they've benefitted as well. We appreciate your being a part of theTable in our conversation of the connection between God and culture, and in this case, the discussion between God and culture in the area of sexuality, and we hope that it's been beneficial to you.