

Stop Sweating & Start Talking

How to Make **SEX** Chats with
Your Kids Easier Than You Think

Andrea Brand

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

Stop Sweating & Start Talking

**How to Make Sex Chats with
Your Kids Easier Than You Think**

Andrea Brand



STOP SWEATING & START TALKING © copyright 2021 by Andrea Brand. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, by photography or xerography or by any other means, by broadcast or transmission, by translation into any kind of language, nor by recording electronically or otherwise, without permission in writing from the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 13: TK

Library of Congress Catalog Number has been applied for.
Printed in the United States of America
First Printing: 2021

25 24 23 22 21 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Zoe Norvell
Interior design by Patrick Maloney

LOGO TK

Wise Ink Creative Publishing
807 Broadway St NE
Suite 46
Minneapolis, MN, 55413

Introduction

“So . . . have you talked to your kids about sex yet?”

This was the question I asked my friends on a crisp fall evening in 2012. I was hosting a dinner party that night for a half dozen couples who were all parents with kids around the same age. At that point, I was huddled with the women as we exchanged our latest parenting challenges. All of us had middle-schoolers, so there was no shortage of topics being raised. And during a brief pause in the conversation, I asked how they were doing in the talking-about-sex department.

The looks of discomfort on their faces confirmed my suspicions. One of the women even blurted out, “Oh THAT! I’ve been putting that conversation off.” The nods, nervous murmurs, and lack of direct eye contact with me suggested she was not alone.

Not wanting to make any assumptions, I probed further. “Really? Is that true for anyone else?”

The answer was more or less the same for all of them. My public health career had prepared me for this moment, and my curiosity was piqued.

Many of us plan to talk with our kids about sex, but how many of us actually follow through? We have good inten-

tions, yet finding a point of conversation entrée poses an irritating challenge for many people. If my friends—women who are smart, clued-in, open, and easy to talk with—had difficulty broaching the subject, what was happening in other families? Surely they were not alone in feeling uncomfortable.

Admittedly, weaving subtle sex-education-related topics into conversations with my own two sons was not always as easy as I would have liked. But I persisted—if my husband and I didn't talk to them about such important matters and give them a foundation of accurate information, who would? Where would they turn when they had questions if they didn't know that we were a safe place for inquiry?

I was motivated to write this book for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to help parents make challenging sex conversations a thing of the past by opening the channels of communication and overcoming whatever fears get in the way. These talks can and will become easier and more comfortable. Imagine conversations about erections and sexual attraction that flow as easily as discussions about the forecast or the draft picks for your favorite sports team. Demystifying the subject of sex from an early age not only makes it more likely that kids will seek parents as a source of information, it can help them talk more comfortably about sex with future partners and their own kids one day.

Second, I am passionate about arming youth with im-

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

portant information that promotes healthy and responsible behavior. The old adage, *knowledge is power*, is of particular relevance here, leading to greater self-esteem, stronger communication skills, and overall empowerment. One of the greatest gifts parents can give is accurate information that serves their children as they develop and become autonomous. A broad education about sex arms youth with important facts to live their best lives.

Finally, I wanted to share the model of a teen discussion group that I developed as a tool for parents to adapt and use on their own. I created the model (detailed in Part 3 of this book) out of a need for more sex-education opportunities that were comprehensive and comfortable, factual and fun. My experience of hosting a group (“Girls’ Group” aka “GG”) was impactful. The model lends itself to easily be replicated so that parents everywhere can help positively impact youth and future generations.

Anyone who is a parent or has observed friends or relatives who are parenting adolescents knows that this age group, with their developing prefrontal cortexes, will not always make the wisest choices. And that is beyond our control. What *is* within our control is the approachability and honesty with which we share information that will serve them.

This book is not a step-by-step solution with a verbatim script and timetable for conversations with your children.

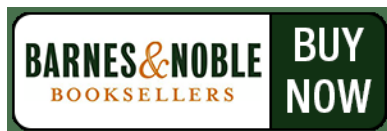
Other books are available that focus on when to address topics at various stages in your child's journey. (I've listed some of my favorite resources in the Resources section.) Rather, this book, which is divided into three parts, offers tips and tricks to help you move beyond whatever is preventing you from opening up to your kids. Part 1 starts with background information about current sex education in the United States, why it needs to become more comprehensive and inclusive, and why it is important that you, as a parent, become more involved in your teen's sex education (as I refer to it). Part 2 outlines my four-step process to helping you take on a more proactive role in your child's sex education by (in this exact order) getting in touch with your values about sex, learning which sex-ed topics are taught at your child's school, familiarizing yourself with available resources in your local community, and taking small steps to see big gains. Finally, Part 3 outlines the model I created for a sex education group, including suggestions for topics to cover and what factors you should consider if you want to form—or even facilitate—such a group.

My goal is to help you identify your roadblocks and devise ways to dismantle them so that you can talk with your kids with confidence. It might feel awkward at first, given that this is unfamiliar territory. But it will feel wonderfully rewarding too.

So what's getting in the way of having these conversa-

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

tions with your kids? And how can you overcome those obstacles? I can assure you that the concerns you have are surmountable and that talking to your teens about sex—believe it or not—is easier than you think.



Part One

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S (LACK OF) SEX EDUCATION

* 1 *

Facts about Sex Education in the United States

How did you learn about sex? If you grew up in the 1970s and 1980s like I did, perhaps you found a book or pamphlet surreptitiously left on your bed from a conscientious but embarrassed parent. Depending on where you went to school, maybe you received a few lessons in biology or health (or “human ecology” as it was called in my upstate New York suburban high school) that covered the physiological changes that happen to your body during puberty, with a very science-focused lesson or two that covered human reproduction. In brief, you might have officially learned very little beyond that adolescence includes acne, body odor, new hair growth, and gonadal changes, and the oversimplified formula that sperm plus egg equals baby.

Sound familiar? If your sex education even slightly resembled this description, it makes complete sense that you do not feel well equipped to have open, comfortable, and easy conversations with your own kids—you likely do not

have a template from which to work. This describes the majority of us as we flail our way around trying to do what feels important without having a model to emulate. And for those of us who had a different experience altogether, some will feel less prepared for such conversations, while others will be more ready. Regardless, we all can benefit from overcoming what gets in the way of talking with our kids.

The US teen birth rate has been declining the last quarter century yet remains higher than in many other developed countries, including Canada and the United Kingdom.¹ Unfortunately, the rates of sexually transmitted infections among teens have not followed a similar trend. Adolescents aged fifteen to twenty-four account for a quarter of the population yet make up nearly half of the twenty million new cases of STIs each year.² These stats are not meant to scare us parents. They are to motivate us. These numbers underscore that there is more—*a lot more*—we can do as parents and educators. There is plenty of room for us to improve what information we feed our kids so they are well informed with medically accurate facts. This will give them the tools to make healthy and informed decisions as they plod—or in some cases, sprint—through adolescence and navigate their way toward adulthood.

School curricula have not consistently progressed from the decade in which you were in middle and high school. If you are hoping (with crossed fingers and toes) that your kid

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

will learn all of the nitty gritty details through a comprehensive sex education curriculum offered at school, that might very well be wishful thinking. Schools have the potential to be an amazing resource to provide our children with medically accurate, comprehensive, culturally sensitive, diverse sex education at developmentally appropriate intervals. And yet there are no national education standards by which states are required to abide. This means that there is an incredibly high level of variability regarding what, when, how, and if sex education is taught in school. States are left to determine their own requirements in this area.

As of February 2021, twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia require sex education to be taught in public schools. And get this: fifteen states do not require the curriculum be medically accurate, culturally responsive, or evidence-based/evidence-informed. Let's pause here and allow that to sink in: only a subset of states *mandate* sex education in public school, and only a subset of those *require* it to be medically accurate. What does that mean in those states where medical accuracy is optional? How would you feel if your child's math, chemistry, or history classes were taught without a requirement that they be factual? Isn't the purpose of school to learn accurate information based on facts? And let's not forget that the remaining twenty-one states do not require any form of sex education in public school.³

For states that do impose sex-education requirements,

there remain wide chasms regarding what topics are covered, the level of detail, and in some cases, the degree of scientific accuracy. YIKES. This sounds like it leaves a lot up to chance if we are relying on schools to educate our children about sex, sexuality, gender identity, birth control, reproduction, and the like. And by the way, *abstinence-only education is required in eleven states.*

If you live in a state where the minimum set of requirements is taught, inconsistencies still prevail. Local school districts within a state have a great deal of autonomy to meet the minimum requirements as they wish. This invites tremendous variability, inconsistency, and potential misinformation. Additionally, school districts within the same state, even in adjacent towns, may rely on dramatically different curricula, if they use them at all, to guide them in what is taught to students. How does this guarantee that what is offered provides a solid foundation for the future?

So if schools are not a reliable source of sex education, who is? Where are kids getting their information? Parents and guardians are *hopefully* talking with their children, starting at a young age. Numerous small conversations throughout a child's development are the way to address this. And who is better equipped to offer information than a trusted parent who, while chatting, can weave their family's values into the conversation. This is true even if a school district offers sexuality education. Parents have an amazing oppor-

tunity to be at the center of their children's sexuality education. Simple as this might sound, this is challenging. Many of us start to hyperventilate at the mere thought.

When kids are not getting the facts they need in a developmentally appropriate manner at school, and when parents become tongue-tied every time they attempt to broach a topic related to sex, where does that leave our children? If we do not offer kids the sex education they deserve, we are basically telling them to figure it out on their own. I've known many teens in my lifetime, and I've learned that hoping they will learn something important without their parents giving them the necessary tools to support their learning is not a recipe for success.

I'll let you in on a little secret: you're not alone in feeling that it is difficult to talk to your kids about sex—to the point that your stomach becomes a ball of knots. This book will help you overcome those immobilizing fears and open the channels of communication in a manner that feels comfortable and right for you.

You Are in Good Company

So many parents wish they could talk with their kids about such important, natural life matters but feel blocked or don't know where to begin. And when we reflect back on our own upbringings, coupled with the hang-ups that many

of us carry, it makes sense that conversation starters on this topic don't roll off our tongues.

If you were to take a cross section of parents who struggle with talking about sex with their children, you would see it cuts across all demographics: race, socioeconomics, religious affiliation, political views, geographic location, and more. In other words, this is not an issue unique to a small subset of parents within specific demographic categories. In fact, like sports fans rooting for their local celebrity team, we are a diverse group by any measure. My objective is to unify us parents as a team that is comfortable talking with our kids throughout their youth. Let's go, team!

It is perfectly normal to be challenged in this area, which is what led me to help other parents and guardians. This concern extends beyond the family unit. A few years ago, I had a driveway moment, staying in the car after arriving home to finish listening to something on the radio. In this case, it was a news story that described the conflict some doctors were experiencing when addressing specific health issues with adolescent patients and their parents. The story focused on a study that examined pediatricians and family physician practices regarding the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which became available in 2006 and is recommended as a routine vaccination for kids around age twelve.

The news story reported that many physicians do not

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

proactively recommend the HPV vaccine to adolescents despite the vaccine's well-documented reputation as being safe and highly effective in the prevention of the most common strands that are known to cause certain cancers. Additionally, many doctors do not educate adolescent patients and their parents about the importance of the HPV vaccine because they are concerned that parents may feel it will encourage sexual activity. This is the same reason that often interferes with parents and schools addressing sex education head-on. Adults in this camp are concerned that talking about sexuality and sharing important factual information would give their young audience permission to become sexually active. In other words, they are worried about the power of suggestion.

DID YOU KNOW?

HPV is spread through sexual contact, and most cervical cancer is associated with particular strains of HPV. The incidence of cervical cancer can be largely prevented when the HPV vaccine is given before exposure to the virus. For this reason, the CDC recommends the HPV vaccine be administered to girls and boys (the latter of whom can be transmitters of the virus) around age eleven to twelve as a protection against cervical cancer later in a female's life.

Good news, though: there is no correlation between sex

ed and earlier engagement in sexual behaviors. In other words, sex education does not encourage sexual activity in our kids. In fact, numerous studies have indicated the opposite, finding that comprehensive sex education is more effective than abstinence-only education across a number of measures.⁴

What does it tell us if doctors are also struggling with having open, honest, proactive talks with their adolescent patients? We rely on the medical community not only to treat us when we are sick, but also to help us remain healthy. Dentists remind us about good tooth brushing and flossing habits to prevent cavities and maintain oral health, while dermatologists drive home the importance of applying sunscreen to prevent skin cancer. Why, then, do some physicians avoid public health messages that center around preventative behaviors to maintain sexual health?

That's why I am here: to help you fill in the educational gaps that exist to encourage intentional, healthy behaviors.

Shifting from Rift to Gift

Curiosity is normal. Humans are lifelong learners. And curiosity about sex is a natural part of development that lasts a long time—almost the entire lifespan, in fact. The complicating factor is that this curiosity might be wrapped in shame for some inquisitive minds, based on cues picked up

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

along the way from their families, school, or place of worship. How liberating would it be if kids felt they could ask their parents ANYTHING without concerns of embarrassment, judgment, or penalty? How would it feel for you to be at ease with your kids' questions about sex without skirting around them, ending the conversation curtly, responding with untruths out of fear, or ignoring the questions altogether? Close your eyes and imagine that right now. It feels a lot better, doesn't it?

If kids are not getting information or sufficient responses from their parents, the curiosity does not magically evaporate. They will look for answers beyond the family bubble. They will talk with their friends who have heard, read, or seen things, perhaps from older siblings, who add a degree of perceived credibility, rightly or wrongly. After all, if the idolized older sibling of a friend said so, why would there be any reason to question it?

If you recall your own experience when you were growing up, you may remember that these second- and third-hand sources of information are not always accurate. One day when I was about seven years old, I was playing outside with one of my neighbors, who was a few years older than me. As we played with rocks and sticks, she nonchalantly explained to me that a girl gets pregnant when a boy puts a pebble in her vagina and it grows into a baby. Never one to be shy, I proudly declared my new understanding of how ba-

bies were made to my family at dinner that evening. Immediately I knew something was amiss when my older brother, a young teenager, erupted with laughter. Meanwhile, my mother tried to disguise her dismay through her noble attempt at a poker face. And that was it. End of discussion.

Kids may—make that WILL—turn to unreliable sources of information to learn about sex in the absence of factual explanations. The problem is, they do not know that their source of information is unreliable, making it a perfect storm for becoming misinformed. The internet is the go-to source of information for many kids, largely because it is so accessible and private. Curiosity, coupled with embarrassment, makes the internet seem like an ideal solution. However, the internet offers access to much more than we bargain for and can send people with innocent queries to shocking sources. Imagine what results might pop up on the computer screen when a curious child looks up a term they heard on the playground or school bus.

This, my friend, is where you can make a difference. As a parent, you are perfectly positioned to be an amazing resource to your beloved children. You want only the best for them. And yet, like so many other parents, maybe you make the exception when it comes to open conversations about sexucation.

Before my first child was born, I consumed book after book about babies' development that influenced my behav-

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

iors to feel a sense of control over the little human I was growing. I researched every gadget and gizmo that would become part of our daily routine before buying it. Car seat, stroller, diapers, baby hygiene products, bottles, crib sheets, mobiles, pacifiers, exposure to music, tummy time. Every purchase and every decision was made with careful calculation and deliberation. I was doing everything I could imagine to ensure the health and well-being of the little nugget, including how I took care of myself during the pregnancy—nutrition, exercise, sleep—for optimal baby development. And once he arrived, the pattern continued. Admittedly, the “have to do this or he’ll be negatively impacted” attitude relaxed as my confidence in parenting increased, and yet his health and development still informed many of my actions. How much does this resonate with you?

With this in mind, how is it that we find ourselves devoting an inordinate amount of time dwelling on small and often inconsequential decisions and toss aside others with real and long-lasting impact? Many parents find themselves overthinking such decisions that in the end, do not truly matter. In contrast, some of us find ourselves barely acknowledging the provision of critically useful life skills. I am referring to information about independent survival such as cooking, budgeting, map reading, contraception, mutual consent, wilderness safety, house repairs, etc., etc., etc.; in

other words, those things that will *actually* serve kids over the course of their lives.

Think about what you have to gain by talking with your kids about sex. From this, you can reap a whole host of benefits: prevention of unintended life events, maintenance of good health, acceptance and inclusion, and trust between you and your child, just to name a few. What is the cost? The initial discomfort of talking about sex, which will hopefully be lessened after you finish reading this book. So what do you have to lose by NOT having these conversations with your kids? In other words, what are the more likely outcomes of avoidance? Without a solid foundation of accurate information, your kids may seek answers from unreliable sources and potentially experience greater associated health risks simply out of ignorance—ignorance that is completely avoidable. They may also miss the opportunity to develop the values you hold deeply and want to share with them.

We parents love our kids, and we want them to be healthy, happy, kind, contributing humans. Our role as parents and caregivers is to keep them safe and provide them with love, basic necessities, and support so they grow to reach their potential. Conversations about sex and comprehensive education on this topic are a part of this. Together, we can normalize conversations about sex so that our fears around this become part of an old story—*your* old story—that is no

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

longer applicable. This might sound scary, but you are here, taking the first step toward working through that fear.

So congratulations! You are on your way to making the discomfort of difficult conversations a thing of the past. This book shares the eye-opening reality of current (mis) information that reaches your kids, as well as proactive and responsive actions you can take to be a positive influence.



* 2 *

Sexual Content Is Everywhere

Your ability (or inability) to talk with your kids about sex doesn't change the fact that we all are surrounded by sexual messages that are subtle or blatant. You can bury your head in the sand, turn a blind eye, or tune out as much as you want. But sexual content is ubiquitous, and it is reaching your kids. Let's go over some of those sources.

Pornography

The ease of access to porn is a far cry from my experience as a sixteen-year-old in the 1980s when I accompanied my bold friend who volunteered to rent a graphic X-rated video for a pizza gathering for our group of six girlfriends. We were curious to see what this porno stuff was all about. And let me say, I was in for a big surprise. If only we had a camera recording everyone's reactions. Our wide eyes and gaping mouths expressed shock, disgust, and delight as the camera zoomed within inches of body parts engaged in sex-

ual intimacy. And all this explicit entertainment appeared within two minutes of pressing play. The directors wasted no time building a plot. They cut right to the chase, or so the saying goes.

Wow, was I naive.

People are drawn to sex. By nature, the majority of humans are sexual, curious beings. The enormous porn film industry is one indicator of this. The big dollars spent here indicate that there is a big market for pornography. The great demand for pornography is fueled by consumers' hunger for sex. The industry would not survive, let alone thrive, without such demand. People from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, races, religions, gender identities, and sexual orientations watch porn, if not regularly, then at some point in their lives. About forty million Americans are regular viewers of internet porn, and the average age at which a child first sees online porn is eleven years old. This does not mean kids are regular visitors or are even intentionally searching for it.⁵ In fact, 34 percent of internet users have accessed porn unintentionally through misdirected links, email, and pop-up ads.⁶

Well-researched scholarly articles and entire books address the great porn debate well beyond the objectives of this book. For our purposes, let's acknowledge the indisputable fact that pornography holds a huge piece of the internet marketplace—and this has implications for people

of all ages. The amount of money spent on producing and selling porn is difficult to measure for a number of reasons. Many porn businesses are privately held; therefore, the revenue they generate is unknown. Additionally, there is a significant piracy market—unauthorized duplications of porn videos are sold at a lower cost—that exists and is not factored into the industry’s bottom-line revenue. These factors contribute to miscalculations of the true gross income of the porn industry. By all accounts, the amount of money consumers spend on porn may be significantly underestimated.

And given the great demand for it, porn is easily accessible. In the pre-internet days, movie rentals from the local video store and magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* were the go-to sources for satisfying one’s hunger for sexual content. One risked embarrassment when renting or purchasing such a publication at the store or newsstand if they did not have access through friends or a family member’s hidden stash. Today it is a different story altogether. Access to porn is literally at the fingertips of anyone with a computer or smartphone. The increased “convenience” factor is a double-edged sword. Individuals (such as youth) who are ill-prepared to comprehend all of the issues regarding what appears on their screen can access it as easily as others who have more mature understanding of what they are watching. Even animated porn, which is created in a format

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

similar to *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*, is a thing! This is a perfect example of providing subject matter intended for mature audiences in a kid-friendly format.

How would you feel if you learned your child was watching porn? How does your opinion change if they have yet to receive sex education? Imagine that your child's first exposure to sex is through a porn site, so it's strictly visual and auditory but without a voiceover that explains what is happening or why. This can be a frightening and unforgettable introduction for someone who doesn't have the knowledge or emotional tools to comprehend what she is watching (and even for some more mature viewers who do have such tools). A kid's first exposure to porn, in the absence of any formal sex education at home, at school, or in a community organization, may serve as a quasi sex-ed tool by default. Scary thought, isn't it? If it feels that way for you, let me assure you that your kid is neither the first nor the last to actively seek out or accidentally stumble upon porn sites on their phone or computer.

There is a dearth of resources that help parents navigate their children's natural curiosity given porn's accessibility. One book that deserves mention is Cindy Pierce's *Sexploitation: Helping Kids Develop Healthy Sexuality in a Porn-Driven World* and is listed in the Resources section at the end of this book. A couple of tips for you:

- Proactively talk to your kids in ways they understand about online safety and healthy sexuality, boundaries, and consent.
- Create rules and parameters about internet use for young kids that you can modify as they get older. They may be more tech savvy than you, but they still need and actually prefer to have parameters from you around the good and bad of the online world.
- For younger kids, concrete specific statements such as “If you ever stumble upon something where you see naked private parts, come tell me. If that happens, you’ve done nothing wrong and you are not in trouble.”
- As they get older, more details about why you do not want your child watching porn are appropriate. The portrayal of a lack of conversation between partners, aggression and violence during intimacy, and body representations are useful to discuss in the context of mutually consensual healthy relationships. A letter I wrote to my son addressing these issues can be found in Chapter 7.

PARENTAL CHALLENGE: Comparing Your Childhood Resources with Those Today

What kinds of questions did you have about your changing body during puberty? Imagine what would happen today when a boy's confusion about spontaneous erections leads him to an innocently curious search on the internet. What search terms would he use? (Erections? Erection in school? Erection in sleep?) More importantly, what websites and images would it lead him to?

Romance Novels

During the 1980s, when I was a tween/teen, my peers and I ravenously read books by Danielle Steel and Judy Blume in search of descriptive and steamy sex scenes. These authors offered private access to information about romance and sex that went well beyond what our parents taught us—that is, *if* our parents talked to us about it—and what we had learned in health class at school. This was particularly true for the many twelve-year-olds who read passages of *Forever* aloud to each other at sleepovers and overnight summer camp when we got ahold of our counselor's dog-eared copy that made the rounds around the bunks. As one friend mentioned, Judy Blume's *Forever* was her source of sex education at sleep-away camp.

Saucy romantic novels have been a popular genre of

fiction for decades. Remember Harlequin romance books? These were also popular when I was growing up. Though they were not my preferred genre for reading, I'll never forget the dramatic covers that showed bare-chested, muscular men in a heroic pose while staring deeply into the eyes of a modellesque woman. This is where the long-maned model Fabio rose to stardom—or at least where I first observed him on displays while I waited in the supermarket checkout line—having graced more than 450 book covers.⁷ The demand for romance novels is still huge today. In fact, romance is a billion-dollar industry annually, accounting for somewhere between one fifth and one third of adult fiction sales.⁸

Erotic fiction, or erotica, is a subgenre of romance novel that is typically more liberal and graphic regarding sexual content. E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* found unprecedented success after it was published in 2011. By 2017, the trilogy had sold over thirty-five million copies in the United States, with the first installment becoming the best-selling book of the decade.⁹ With the popularity of e-readers and online booksellers such as Amazon and Barnes and Noble, curious consumers too shy to purchase or borrow a book in person can discreetly get their fill of erotica without venturing out in public. Additionally, a plethora of websites allow anyone to post and read erotic short stories for those interested in smaller bites to get their fix.

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

Budding romance and steamy scenes sell, even without the confines of any significant plot. Many curious adolescents and prepubescents experience increased curiosity for romance and erotic literature. Such writings offer detailed descriptions that allow imaginations to run wild. To a youngster, it can be both fascinating and cringeworthy. And whether one reads with hungry eagerness or trepidation, the demand for literature of this genre remains steadily high, as evidenced by its sales.

Whether you are a frequent consumer of this type of literature, have read a few pieces of work in this category, or have never turned a single page, you can probably guess which parts of a romantic or sex scene are emphasized and which ones are left out. As romantic seduction builds and the characters' passion for each other practically leaps off the page, have you ever observed a protagonist pause to say something like "Excuse me while I fetch a condom," or "The dental dam is in the drawer of the bedside table"? Remember, sex sells. Increased sales of these books are correlated with their level of steaminess, not with their discussion of which birth control method to use. But when discussions of safe sex practices are excluded from romance scenes in books—or any medium, for that matter—it is a disservice to readers who have yet to receive sex education and are unable to recognize their absence.

Advertisements and Media Literacy

Have you ever driven along the highway and observed a billboard displaying an attractive woman in a seductive pose with a headline that you may not have had time to read before it is out of view? Chances are you have, without ever realizing what product was being advertised in that giant photo on the side of the road. And that's the point. Images of scantily clad, provocative women (often girls) are frequently used to promote products that have nothing to do with the models staring down at us while we cruise past at sixty-five miles per hour.

Back in the mid-1980s, I took a marketing and advertising class in high school. At one point, we watched *Killing Us Softly*, the debut film by activist and brilliant media-literacy expert Jean Kilbourne. During the movie, she gently walked the viewer (with appropriate humorous interjections as needed) through the process in which female images are altered and used in advertising. My mind was moving at high speed after I watched how blatant and subtle images of women's and girls' sexuality were being used to sell products of all types. Suggestive poses and sexual innuendos were incorporated into ads for everyday products—from fashion, perfumes, and cosmetics, to beer and cars—an attempt to create appeal and desire for the lifestyle represented in the

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

ad. Once you see it, it's almost impossible to unsee it—and believe me, it's everywhere.

The advertising industry's use of sex to sell products is a tried-and-true trick that has been in place for decades. We can find this imagery in everything from the billboards that line our municipal highways to magazine and TV ads. Suggestive pictures of beautiful people clad in minimal clothing lure prospective consumers to buy or use their product. It's geared toward making you think, *Hell, if using that product will make me look that young, thin, sexy, etc. and have that kind of lifestyle, sign me up. I want to be like them—and if I buy that product, I will be like them.* This is precisely how advertisers hope prospective consumers will think. And for viewers who lack media literacy (and that's many of us), the public-health implications—low self-esteem, body image concerns, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and much more—are real and significant.

Did You Know?

Media literacy is the ability to use critical thinking skills to decipher the messages and symbols used by advertisers.

Since the original release of *Killing Us Softly*, Kilbourne has released three updated versions and continues to be a public speaker and media-literacy promoter. If you're not

familiar with her work, I highly recommend checking it out. And if you think it's appropriate for your children, depending on their age and level of maturity, consider watching *Killing Us Softly* with them as an opportunity to open channels of communication on this topic. Media literacy is not routinely taught in schools around the country. Yet it is so important given its connection to many public health concerns that are the result of unrealistic portrayals of people's bodies, the sexualization of young girls, and the like. A quick internet search for the film or Jean Kilbourne will lead you to a variety of useful resources including discussion questions that can serve as prompts for broaching this subject with your children.

Television and Movies

Television shows and movies come with TV parental guidelines, which are ratings that can be helpful for parents who question how appropriate a particular film or program is for their child. The rating system offers categories for minimum suggested age as well as content descriptors for suggestive or crude language, sexual themes, and violence. However, keep in mind that no one knows your child better than you do, so these ratings are *suggested* guidelines. For better or worse, should you choose to follow them or some modified version of such guidelines, it requires a degree of supervision by you,

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

which you may or may not feel comfortable managing. This can feel like helicoptering to some parents.

Your parenting style is uniquely yours, and you want to trust it. It is not my intention to tell you how to parent your child or insist you follow a strict set of guidelines about what is okay for your child to view at what age. That requires an assessment that you are perfectly situated to make, based on your child's personality, maturity level, and developmental stage, and your own personal values. Rather, my intention here is to raise your awareness by getting you thinking about what your kids might be watching without your knowledge, if that matters to you. You are in a position to make an informed decision based on what feels right for your family. Many parents are unaware of the adult-themed programming that's available on television, which can be easily accessed through the generous and competitive cable TV/internet streaming packages that are now so common in households across the United States. Some will allow you to set parental controls, so you may want to explore that if it's important to you. But let's be real here: kids' access to television and movies goes beyond what they can click on using the remote control. Even if you choose to set parental controls, kids who are interested will likely find other avenues to access the forbidden fruit.

Music and Lyric Content

When I was growing up, I was fortunate to have an inexpensive turntable and speakers in my bedroom, so I would listen to LPs behind closed doors to tune out the world and get lost in my thoughts. I even saved my babysitting money to buy a knockoff version of a Sony Walkman on a field trip to New York City's Lower East Side. I could listen to cassettes for hours and hours on my bed through those spongy headphones. The too-loud music blocked out the household noise and spoke directly to me. The music vibrated throughout my body and the messages resonated as if written for me. Oh, the ego of a fourteen-year-old!

Today, with many kids playing music through their smartphones via headsets, I smile at the rite of passage that is getting lost in the lyrics and discovering oneself through music. I am nostalgic for the days when music moved me so much as I identified with the lyrics of the painful journey of the singer as only a teen experiencing common adolescent angst can. However, now the stakes feel greater given the explicit nature of some of today's popular music.

Admittedly, I am a product of the 1970s music era, and it remains my go-to decade when I am looking to unwind with a trip down memory lane. My preferences aside, I've discovered that a great way to connect with my kids is through music. Sure, I exposed them to my music tastes

STOP SWEATING & START TALKING

when they were young, but now I try to meet them where they are and, at a minimum, listen to and try to learn what they enjoy about their playlists. Much of the popular music they listen to is stuff I enjoy too. And, of course, a sense of pride washes over me when artists from my past—the Beatles, the Eagles, and Queen, to name a few—are part of their repertoire. There is more overlap in our music tastes than there is disparity.

Then there is the *other* music my kids like. Without identifying specific artists or dissing anyone's musical preferences, I'll say that one genre of music is highly explicit and wildly popular among youth and adults alike. Though it is not for me, this style of music is unquestionably a display of amazing talent. In fact, many of these artists are Grammy-winners and nominees, an indication of just how gifted they are.

In the 1980s, the Parental Advisory Label (PAL) was created for a handful of albums that were deemed “porn rock.” This became a divisive issue as artists argued for freedom of expression and parents behind the labeling policy held the view that suggestive lyrics would negatively influence their malleable children's behavior. Now, with a vast majority of music being streamed rather than purchased in a format one can hold in their hand, the labeling has become almost a moot point. In all likelihood, your child is listening to explicit music. This includes every four-letter word imaginable, the n-word, dark and violent messages, and offensive references to sex.

Some, if not all, of the music your child is listening to will vary from your own playlist. This translates into an incredible opportunity for you to connect with your child through music. How can you engage your kids from a place of curiosity?

Even though I do not like some of the music my kids choose to listen to, I see their music choice as part of their development. It is an expression of their figuring out who they are. I can simultaneously dislike some of their music choices and love that they are able to appreciate various music styles. We have had many discussions about the meanings of songs, including those that I describe as angry soapbox rhetoric. What an amazing opportunity to communicate my values while they are discovering theirs. Our musical tastes overlap maybe 70–80 percent of the time. For the remaining 20–30 percent of the time, I embrace the opportunity to understand what they find appealing about music that does not resonate with me. And they have taught me a great deal.

There is a lot to be gained from these kinds of conversations with your kids. Discovering where music preferences are aligned and where they stray lends itself to interesting discussions with your children. An added benefit is the mutual sharing of thoughts and feelings that music provokes. Remaining open and nonjudgmental reinforces you as a trusted person and sets the stage for future conversations about a wide variety of subjects.

Parental Challenge: Taking Steps to Connect with Your Child through Music

These six steps may help you get to know more about your child. By staying curious, you are more likely to encourage openness in sharing:

1. Become familiar with what music your child is listening to. How can you do this? Here are some suggestions:
Invite them to play their music in the car or home when you are together. Ask them who their favorite artists are and why. Have them explain what they like about their favorites.
2. Use the content as an opportunity to raise issues important to you without shaming your child for liking the music.
3. Acknowledge that musical brilliance and offensive language/messages are not mutually exclusive.
4. Be honest about why you like or don't like the music without insulting your child's tastes.
5. Share that music preferences vary person to person and may change over time, and there is no right or wrong about our taste for music.
6. Express appreciation to your child for participating in open conversations.

