

**WE  
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TO  
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**CREATING SPACE  
FOR HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS  
ABOUT SEXUALITY**



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**ADAM MEARSE, PH.D.**

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For Christina, who brings joy, passion, and organization  
to my life.

For Zachary, Elizabeth, and Jackson, my most treasured  
talking partners.

And, for all the students and parents that have allowed me  
to walk alongside you.



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# INTRODUCTION

**YOU HAVE PICKED** up a book that claims it can help you create an environment in your home, church, friend group, etc. for healthy conversations about sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Good for you! If you read and follow the strategies offered within this little story, I believe that this book will live up to that claim.

I am thoroughly convinced that sexuality takes up more headspace in the minds of teens and young adults than any other single subject. Young people are inundated with sexual topics in entertainment, news media, at school, and certainly in their own thoughts. There was a time when parents and others who care about young people could simply drop a few hints, wink a couple times, and assume

## WE NEED TO TALK

their kids were on the same page about sex and sexuality. Of course, that did not really work even then, but in an age where kids have nearly unlimited access to information, opinions, images, and video in the palms of their hands, parental silence is flat-out hurtful. It is time for parents, and others who care, to get in the game - and I believe this book is a good place to start.

Before you jump in, there are few things I want you to know about *We Need to Talk*:

1. It is about a plan. More than anything else, I want you to finish this book with a concrete strategy for creating space in your life and environment where sexuality is openly discussed and it is understood as healthy and important. As you read through each chapter, you will see that the Thompsons (the stars of our story) will create a plan of their own. In the back of the book, you will find space to create your personalized plan in the same manner. I genuinely hope you will take time to work through this. Add to, subtract from, and change it to suit your needs.

2. It is short. This is not because I do not have more to say about sexuality. My own kids will readily testify that I have a nearly unending stream of thoughts to share. This book is short because I want you, my much-appreciated patron, to read the whole thing. You are busy. You have jobs to show up for, households to run, and people you take care of. Research is startlingly clear that readers tend not to finish long books. I believe the ideas here can truly

help you and your family, so I desperately want you to get all the way through the book. Thus, brevity.

3. It is a story. I wrote *We Need to Talk* as a narrative for a couple reasons. Chief among them, I want you to read the whole book (I may have mentioned that already). My hope is that the story helps keep you engaged, and possibly even adds some whimsy to the process. Another reason for the format choice is that I want to offer you examples of people engaging in thought and conversations that really happen. In fact, the conversations represented here are based on those that I have had myself, or others have shared with me. This may be a good place to say that I patterned *We Need to Talk* after some of the works of Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. Perhaps you've read *The One Minute Manager*, which they penned together. It is brilliant in its simplicity of format and depth of insight. Of course, they have proven to be brilliant thinkers and communicators, so their success in writing is no surprise. I owe them a debt of gratitude for both their impact on my own thinking as well as for the idea of writing this book in a similar style.

4. It has people in it. *We Need to Talk* tells the story of the Thompson family as they seek wisdom and strategies to help them make their home a place where sexuality is commonly and openly discussed. They gratefully receive insight from friends and family. None of these characters are real. They are all composites of people I know and have interacted with over the years. In some cases, characters are

a bit of an homage to individuals that have been particularly valuable to me, but none of them exist fully in the real world. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy them.

5. There are endnotes. This book is based on research and established social-science theory. The intersection of faith and sexuality is my primary area of academic inquiry and writing, so some of the research cited is my own. Most of it is from other scholars in fields such as sociology, psychology, and communication theory. There are also a few notes tucked away in there just to offer a little more commentary (some of it attempting to be humorous) on statements or ideas included in the narrative. The endnotes are the extended conversation I would have with you if we were talking about this in person over a great cup of coffee.

## NOTES:

1. Sexuality is a very broad topic. As an example, below is the World Health Organization's definition of the term. I include it here because, if nothing else, I want you to see how complex sexuality is and how much of our humanness is involved in it. If *this* isn't a topic worth quite a bit of conversation, I don't know what is!

“A central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles

and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.”

World Health Organization. 2006. Defining sexual health: report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva. World Health Organization. [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual\\_health/defining\\_sexual\\_health.pdf](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf) (Accessed September 3, 2014).



## PROLOGUE

# MEET THE THOMPSONS

**MARIA THOMPSON PULLED** into the after-school pick-up line at Elmwood Elementary. Five-year-old Andrew, having returned home from kindergarten earlier, was singing along to the radio from his car seat behind her. Her daughter, Kayla, soon came scampering out with the rest of her second-grade class and climbed into their minivan.<sup>1</sup> As they pulled away from the curb, Maria absent-mindedly recited the same question she asked each day: “How was school today, Sweetheart?” Kayla’s response changed the Thompsons’ world forever.

“School was fine. Kind of boring. Mommy, what’s sex?”

Maria felt like her heart stopped beating instantaneously. Trying to play it cool, she responded with, “What,

uh...what do you mean, sweetheart? Where did you learn that word?"

"I heard some of the older girls talking about it. One of them said she wanted to have sex with some guy on YouTube. What does that even mean?"

Maria's head was swimming. The steering wheel was starting to feel slippery from her sweaty palms. "Sex is... It's when... I'll tell you what, let's talk about that later, OK? I was thinking of stopping for ice cream, what do you say about that?"

The kids cheered as Maria pulled into the ice cream shop. She knew this was a total parenting copout, but Maria felt lost, more than a little terrified, and entirely unprepared.

Fortunately, ice cream was exactly the distraction Maria hoped it would be. Kayla was soon lost in the rainbow of flavor choices and the rush of sugar. To Maria's great relief, the word sex was not uttered again that afternoon.

William eased his truck into the driveway, glad to be home. Working as an electrical engineer for a local power company, he always felt mentally drained when he arrived home in the evenings. As he eased open the front door, he was looking forward to a hearty meal and a relaxing night. That was not to be the case.

His daughter Kayla and son Andrew were sitting on the couch as he walked in. Leaping up, Andrew ran headlong

into his legs with a power hug and a shout of, “Daddy!” William hugged and tickled his son for a moment. Kayla looked up from her math homework and said, “Hi Daddy,” with a smile. William absolutely loved that smile. He kissed the top of Kayla’s head as he walked past her and into the kitchen. Hearing him enter, Maria turned from the chicken she was seasoning on the counter to face him. William knew immediately that this was going to be a long night.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “You look mad. Or sad. Or, something.”

“I am! All of those things!” Maria said, keeping her voice low.

“What happened?”

“Your daughter came home from school today and asked me what sex is!” Maria let that statement sit there for a moment. She somewhat enjoyed the stunned look on William’s face — now he knew how she had felt earlier.

“What?” William half-whispered, half-shouted. “Where did she learn that word? Was it a boy? Which boy? I’ll kill him.”

“She heard it from some of the older girls at school,” Maria replied. “Apparently one of them wants to have sex with someone on YouTube. I don’t get the whole YouTube celebrity thing, by the way. But, we’ll get back to that later.”

William was silent for a moment, trying to process how the idea of sex ended up in the head of his precious,

innocent little girl. Could he get it out of there? Was there a chance she could forget she ever heard it?

“What do we do?” he finally asked.

“I don’t know,” Maria replied. “I’ve thought about it nonstop since school let out. Maybe we should just have ‘the talk’ with her,” she said, making finger quotes in the air.<sup>2</sup>

“Isn’t she a little young for that?” asked William, doubtfully. “My dad didn’t tell me about that stuff until I was fifteen.”

“How’d that work out?” asked Maria, knowing full-well that William remembered that experience as one of the most awkward of his childhood.

“So, what then? Where do we even start?”

Maria thought for a moment, then had an idea. “What if we try to talk to some people about it?”

“Like who?” William asked cautiously.

“I don’t know...how about Anita? She raised the best kids ever. She always seems to know what to do,” said Maria, a hint of optimism in her voice.

“That’s not a bad idea,” said William. “You go talk to her. Maybe I’ll swing by and see if Duane has any ideas.”

“Your brother?” Maria asked doubtfully. “He doesn’t even have kids.”

“True, but he is a football coach, so he works with kids all the time, and he has a degree in psychology, I think.

Plus, he's good at figuring out tough problems...and this is a doozy."

"OK," said Maria, feeling a little momentum building. "You talk to Duane and I'll go have coffee with Anita. After that, we'll see where we stand. I don't think Kayla is too worked up about it. She doesn't seem to understand why it's a big deal. Hopefully, that will buy us a few days to figure out what we are going to say to her."

"Alright," William sighed. "If that doesn't work, can we just keep her home until she turns thirty?"

## NOTES:

1. Fourth grade was the most common age cited by my own research participants as the age at which they became aware of sexuality as a force in their lives. However, I see this age dropping in casual observation. I interviewed college students, all of whom are in their mid-twenties as I write this book. In the years since they were children, the cultural saturation with sexuality seems to be driving this first-awareness down toward first or second grade. There were a variety of ways my interview subjects described this awareness beginning: jokes from older siblings, their attention captured by a romantic scene on TV, stumbling across something on the internet, and the like. Most of these were relatively innocuous experiences that served to make the subject consciously aware of sexuality for the first time they

could remember. This research was published in my Ph.D. dissertation, which can be accessed here:

Mearse, Adam. 2015. *We Need to Talk: Evangelical College Students' Perceptions on Positive Orthodox Sexuality and Pedagogical Implications for Church Leaders and Parents*. Trinity International University. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.

2. “The talk” doesn’t work. Research indicates it actually derails communication among parents and their children. Parents overestimate the positive effect it has on their children and generally feel overly positive about how the conversation went after it is over. Children, on the other hand, end up feeling embarrassed and awkward and never want to discuss sexuality with mom and dad again. Which, they frequently do not.

Regnerus, Mark. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 (pg. 60).