

Helping Your Children Establish Sexual Accountability

Tim Geiger
President, Harvest USA



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Why Sexual Accountability?

Parents might be tempted to think that helping their children establish standards and systems for sexual accountability is unnecessary. After all, since Scripture teaches that sex is for marriage, what is the purpose of accountability before marriage? Ideally, children wouldn't be sexually active anyway.

Celibacy is certainly the biblical standard for any unmarried person, regardless their age. However, parents must bear two things in mind. First, even young and relatively shielded children are exposed to sexualized images and themes, and these exposures have deleterious effects upon children's hearts and minds. Sadly, we learn sinful behavior all too easily. Children need accountability because they will replicate this behavior in their thoughts, words, and eventually their deeds.

The second thing to bear in mind is that sin is not limited to outward behavior. In Matthew 5:29, Jesus tells us that "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Parents should note that boys are not more susceptible to sexual sin than girls, and that this teaching applies equally to both sexes.)

In other words, even though children might not be acting out physically with others, they may indeed be sinning inwardly in their thoughts and fantasies. Indeed, the lifelong patterns of sexual struggle and sin which we observe in adults at Harvest USA nearly always begin as patterns of thought, perception and fantasy in children and adolescents. Being proactive in helping young people to walk in repentance in these areas of life may very well prevent the development of lifelong patterns of sexual sin, which often wreak havoc in the lives of the adults those children become—and cause collateral damage in their relationships with other people and with the Lord.

In short, working with your children to establish standards and systems for sexual accountability will not only help them avoid the potential pitfall of a lifelong struggle with sexual sin, but it will:

1. Foster a sense of transparency, honesty and humility in relationships in general.
2. Encourage them to live lives of self-control in all areas of life, not only in the realm of sex and sexuality.
3. Train them to take to heart a biblical understanding of sex, sexuality and relationships.
4. Lead them to disciple their own children in biblical accountability.
5. Prepare a new generation of wise leaders for the church.

Let's look at what sexual accountability looks like, and then talk about how to foster it in your child's life.

What is sexual accountability?

Sexual accountability isn't a biblical category, *per se*. But accountability, in general, is. Accountability is mentioned over and over again in Scripture.

In the Old Testament, the believer is called to accountability both with God and with fellow believers. The requirement for the forgiveness of sin was sacrifice, which had to be offered publicly (in the tabernacle or temple). No one could walk in repentance in isolation. In addition, the cleansing for several kinds of uncleanness had to be performed publicly. Again, any admitted sin was public sin in Israel.

In the New Testament, the believer is called again to accountability both with God and with fellow believers. The passage referred to earlier (Matthew 5:29) is not alone in the association of even one's private thoughts with sin that must be confessed and repented of publicly. In the "church life" section of Ephesians (Chapters 4-6), Paul says clearly that the things done (inwardly and outwardly) in darkness must be exposed "by the light" (5:12-13)—and in so doing, the one who once lived in the darkness of secret sin will find new freedom from sin in fellowship with Christ and with his people. Paul ends this section of his letter with a radical call for Christians to live in submission to one another "out of reverence for Christ" (5:21).

Essentially, the call for the Christian is to live with no secrets and no secret sin (Ephesians 4:25). This is no more radical a calling in the 21st Century than in the First. Paul tells us that if we are in Christ, then we should not shield anything from public scrutiny that could lead us to sin. The community of believers is the primary means God has provided for us to grow in maturity as Christians (4:11-16). If we stubbornly refuse to live openly and transparently in that community, we will remain spiritual children, always harassed and hampered by our secret sin.

So, that's the biblical mandate for sexual accountability. But the practical reasons for sexual accountability are compelling as well. As mentioned previously, no young person today lives in isolation from sexualized images, cultural pressures to be sexually active outside marriage, or the ordinary sexual struggle that exists in the heart of every fallen human being. Sexual accountability is a necessary component in order to live a life of holiness in a world gone rogue from God's wise precepts.

What does sexual accountability look like?

Sexual accountability for children has three components: **know**, **think**, and **do**. *What do I know about what I'm called to sexually as a child of God? What am I choosing to think about sexually, and what do I do with unholy sexual thoughts that come into my mind? What do I choose to do with my body, and with my words?* These are three questions that should frame the perimeters for sexual accountability.

Let's look at these three components in a bit more detail.

1. *What do I know about what I'm called to sexually as a child of God?* God commands us to know his will concerning how we use everything we've been given. He tells us in Deuteronomy 5:31-33 that we should be "careful to do as the Lord [our] God has commanded [us]." He tells us in Proverbs 22:6 that we should "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." As a parent, what are you telling your son or daughter about sex, sexuality and gender? In what ways are you engaging his or her heart and intellect with God's wisdom? Only to the extent that parents engage their children proactively will those children ever learn to think and act wisely.
2. *What am I choosing to think about sexually, and what do I do with unholy sexual thoughts that come into my mind?* How are you, as a parent, helping your child interpret the thoughts that he or she has about sex, sexuality and gender? Are you sitting down with your son or daughter on a regular and frequent basis to have frank discussions about what they're thinking? About what he or she is dwelling on in his or her daydreams? About the fantasies in which he or she chooses to engage?
3. *What do I choose to do with my body, and with my words?* In some respects this is the easiest part of establishing sexual accountability: focusing on behavior. Are you talking with your son or daughter about what he or she has done? Flirting with someone else, engaging in gateway physical contact (kissing, snuggling, petting), masturbation, oral sex, or intercourse? Has he or she looked at pornographic (or quasi-pornographic) websites?

These three questions are questions that parents must ask the young people in their lives to use for self-examination. They are also questions which parents must ask their children, lovingly, frequently, and regularly as they cultivate godly hearts and personalities in their young ones. Here are some variations on the questions above that parents might actually ask:

1. *Do you know what God's Word says about sex and how it is to be used? Let's look, and talk about it together.*
2. *How do you struggle with your sexual identity? In what ways do you think that your self-image and worth come from how others view you sexually?*
3. *Does the Bible say that you are primarily a sexual being, or someone created in God's image?*

4. *To what specific standards of behavior does God's Word call unmarried people?*
5. *Do you struggle with what God says about saving sexual activity for marriage? Let's talk about that.*
6. *In what specific ways are you struggling with sexualized thoughts about other people?*
7. *When do you struggle most frequently with those sexualized thoughts? Is it when you're feeling a certain way (lonely, afraid, insecure, bored, self-conscious, overwhelmed, etc.)?*
8. *When you do have sexual or sexualized thoughts that come into your mind, what do you do with them?*
9. *What do you think it would look like for you to take control of those thoughts, so that they don't wind up hijacking your mind and heart?*
10. *Do you have thoughts that come up over and over again, that you just can't seem to get rid of? Let's talk about those, and pray about them together.*
11. *Have you done anything sexual lately that you think God is asking you to confess?*
12. *Have you masturbated lately? Let's talk about the circumstances surrounding that. Was it when you felt a certain way (lonely, afraid, insecure, bored, self-conscious, overwhelmed, etc.)?*
13. *Have you looked at pornography lately? If not pornography, have you looked at anything on your devices that you would be ashamed for me to see? Let's talk about why you think you did that.*
14. *Have you been talking, or texting, or communicating in any way that would be out of accord with God's Word? Let's talk about why you think you did that.*

Sexual accountability is more about the heart than about behavior

Certainly, what we do matters to God. God's children are instructed to not behave sinfully (1 John 2:1). But the sin we commit is never a spontaneous harvest of unrighteousness. It always *comes* from somewhere. At some point in the past, the person committing the sinful act in the present planted a seed of sin, which was nurtured and cultivated until it bore fruit.

Rarely does this process of cultivation occur at a conscious level. Rather, we tend to cultivate more through benign neglect than anything else.

What I mean by that is, we cultivate the evil harvests in our lives through choosing to *not* actively cultivate the harvests of righteousness—of good, God-honoring things. We make conscious decisions to *not* pull the weeds that would grow up alongside the good plants, and choke them out.

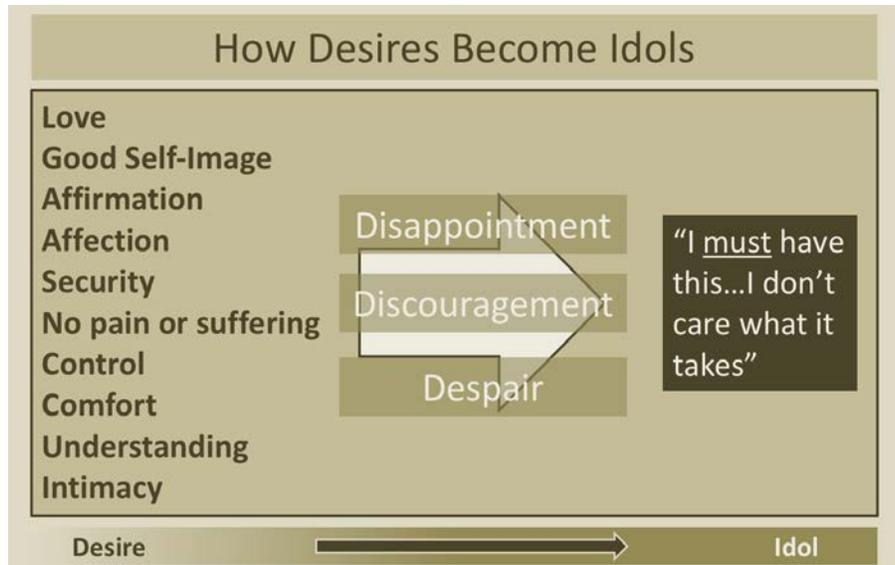
Putting it another way, we enjoy seeing just how much we can get away with. *Surely this won't hurt me! There are no consequences if I do this just once. I can stop before it gets out of control.* Those are the kinds of self-talk justifications we speak to ourselves inwardly, so that we don't grow alarmed that things might be out of control.

We repeat for the umpteenth time the pattern God describes for us in Proverbs 7:1-27. There, the Teacher warns his young student against the smooth words of the adulteress. Her words are convincing, and seem to meet his every felt need. What she offers doesn't seem too risky or dangerous—and it promises to feel oh, so good! But before the young man in the story knows it, he's caught like an animal in a trap—and he's about to be devoured.

Just like the words of the adulteress in Solomon's proverb, the ungodly words and ideas we allow to land and take root in our heart are the seeds that grow and result in a harvest of hopelessness and sin. The key to controlling those weeds—and eventually eradicating them—is to keep them from taking root in the first place.

Help your child to think through the reasons **why** he or she might want to misuse God's gift of sex and sexuality. Often, those reasons are directly related to common, everyday *desires* that he or she has—desires which are in and of themselves good, but which become too important. Those desires wind up controlling the intentions of the heart instead of serving them, and then your son or daughter is looking for ways—most of them sinful—to satisfy them.

Here is a diagram that shows how otherwise good desires can wind up controlling someone's heart and behavior.



Your children experience all of the types of desire listed on the left side of the diagram. Through the fact that these desires generally aren't met in the ways that he or she would prefer (i.e., others don't affirm them in the ways they want; they feel out of control at school, at home or in relationships; they fail to live up to the expectations of others and therefore don't merit love; they look in the mirror and realize they don't look the way they *want* to look), they experience disappointment.

As cycle after cycle of disappointment leaves its mark, your child becomes discouraged. *This desire is never going to be met.* Eventually, they fall into despair, saying something like, *I can't live without this desire being met. I'll do whatever it takes.* That's the point at which your child will turn to the most expedient means—which is always sin—to seemingly meet that desire.

Misusing sex is a sure-fire way to seemingly satisfy each of the desires listed above. Looking at pornography can provide a sense of comfort or control. Being in someone's embrace can provide a sense of intimacy. Being pursued by someone in a relationship (or a one-time experience) can create a sense of unconditional love and escape. Masturbation can seem to relieve the suffering of loneliness, even if just for a moment.

Talking with your child and helping them to think through the desires that lie *behind* the sexual desires they experience is a key to helping them take control of those sexual desires, thoughts and behaviors. When they begin to understand that *when I feel unaffirmed is when I often look at pornography* or *when I feel unloved is when I masturbate*, they can then (with your help) begin to turn those desires to the Lord, to find that he is the best—and ultimate—satisfaction of those desires.

How? Through discipleship. Discipleship is the process through which one teaches another to exercise self-control in order to submit the desires of the heart to God. In brief, here's how it works.

1. You (the parent) communicate to your child that God is good. *How do I know that God is good? He tells me in His Word. I've also experienced God's goodness and faithfulness in my life...and here are some examples.*
2. You ask your child where they struggle to find comfort in what God says in their own life and experience. *I've shared with you where I've seen God come through in my life. What do you think about that? Where is your experience the same as mine? Where is it different? Be honest.*
3. You admit to your child that finding contentment in God's love and care is a struggle. *I don't want you to think that this comes easily. I need to fight to be content. Here's what my fighting looks like. Here are examples of how difficult that fight is. But here's why the fight is important.*
4. You confess to your child (in age-appropriate ways) that you have not always fought well; that there have been instances in your own life where you've chosen to sow seeds of unrighteousness and to enjoy sin. *I'm not perfect. I've sinned, and here's how—and why. But here's what I've learned through the hard process of dealing with the bitter effects of sin.*
5. You talk with your child about how to walk with increasing consistency in faith and repentance. *Here are some things I've done that have worked. Here's what you might try doing when you have thoughts that just won't go away. Here is Scripture that I've turned to for help. Here is how I pray when I'm tempted to do the kinds of things that you want to do.*
6. You encourage your child to embrace the struggle against sin, rather than give in when it seems too hard. Encourage them to do that within the context of community. *You can't struggle alone and struggle well. Scripture says we need each other, to bear each other's burdens and to stay focused on the Lord (Hebrews 3:12-13; Galatians 6:1-2). Come to me when you are struggling, and I won't judge you. But I will help you bear those burdens, just like Jesus helps you. I'll talk with you, pray with you, cry with you. I won't leave you alone—and neither will Jesus.*
7. You point your child toward Jesus as the one who is ultimately able to help them. *Scripture tells us that Jesus wants to help you, and that he wants you to grow in your relationship with him. Jesus suffered when he was tempted, and he's able to help you when you are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).*
8. You point your child to Jesus as the one who is the advocate with God the Father, who reminds you of your complete forgiveness and righteousness before God even when you do sin (1 John 2:1-2). *If God kept a record of our wrongs, neither you nor I would have any hope. But God generously and lovingly forgives us and takes our guilt away (Psalms 103:10-13) and loves us like the father in the parable of the prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus wants me to cry out to him when I know I've blown it. Why? Because he wants to show me his mercy and grace. And he wants you to rest in that same assurance of God's forgiveness and his love. Let's pray together that you would rest in his love (Hebrews 4:15-16).*

How to begin the conversation

Yes, this process of discipleship leading toward robust and fruitful sexual accountability in your child is an ongoing conversation—not a once-and-done talk. It’s a conversation that will rarely bless you with convenient occasions for interaction. Those talks will probably never be easy, though they might seem less burdensome for you, the more you engage in them. They will sometimes come at inopportune times, like late at night or after a fight with your child.

But this is a process which will yield the fruit of repentance in your child. Are you willing to put in the long hours to help make that happen? Are you willing to bear your child’s crushing burdens of doubt, fear, anger and shame while you lead him or her to trust increasingly in the Lord Jesus as the satisfaction of all his or her desires (Psalms 103:5)? I promise you that your labor will not be in vain.

How might you begin this process?

1. Pray. Pray for your own heart. Pray that your son’s or daughter’s heart would be softened and that they would receive God’s truth and the earnest (though sometimes awkward) love of their parent.
2. Pray for the courage to not only initiate the first installment of the conversation, but that you would be faithful to initiate installments throughout the process. You, as the parent, must take the lead in this. You must always be the one to ask the questions and keep the ball rolling. That isn’t easy, but God will grant you the self-control and courage to make it possible.
3. Don’t be afraid of hearing your son or daughter say hard things about what they’ve seen, done or thought. It’s there already. Isn’t it better for the truth to come into the light rather than it remain in the dark? Your child’s sin or struggle doesn’t change who he or she is. Resist the temptation to view your child as “damaged goods.” Rather, pray for spiritual eyes to see this as an opportunity to lead your son or daughter in repentance, so that they would truly become the godly man or woman they were created to be.
4. Set aside a day and time to sit down with your child. This is a serious conversation, so treat it as such. Don’t allow yourself to be distracted. Set aside enough time (One hour? Two?) to really dig down deeply.
5. Ask questions. Don’t lecture. Always gather information from your child and then reflect back to them either observations or questions from what you hear. Reason with your son or daughter, to help them grapple with the primary question: *Where does what I believe match or fail to agree with what God says?*
6. Don’t be afraid to dwell in certain places for long times. Perhaps one question or one point of doctrine will keep you engaged for a week or a month. God is patient with you. Pray for endurance to reflect that same patience to your son or daughter.
7. Don’t be tempted to think that you need to be the one to convince your son or daughter of the truth. You are a messenger. The Holy Spirit is the one who, in the proper time, gives grace to believe and to change worldviews and behavior. You do your job, and allow him to do his.

8. Don't be afraid to be awkward. Perhaps you've never talked about these topics with anyone else. That's not a reason to not move forward with your son or daughter. Trust that the Lord will be at work in the conversation even in the midst of your awkwardness, bringing results that you can't even imagine. Don't you think that your child will be impacted by your candor, your love, your patience, your willingness to talk about the hard things, the deep things of his or her heart? That impact might take a while to evidence itself—but your child will love and respect you more—and will love God more—as he or she sees you suffering in order to show them selfless love.
9. Ask others to talk and pray with you. Don't go this alone. Without betraying any confidences your child might share with you, ask your spouse and/or a trusted Christian friend to help you process what you're hearing from your child, and how you're responding to it. The Lord wants to use this process not only to grow your child's faith and spiritual maturity, but your own, as well.
10. Model in your own life the very accountability you're pursuing with your son or daughter. Do so with your spouse, and with a trusted same-sex friend. Learn how to counsel and lead your son or daughter as you live out the very transparency, vulnerability and trust that you encourage in them.

When should I begin the conversation?

The answer is usually, *right now*. Obviously, the content, tone and expectations of the conversation will change as your child grows and as you and he or she grow in your ability to talk candidly and lovingly about these issues.

But the conversation should begin at a much earlier age. Children generally first become sexually aware and curious around the ages of 6-8. At those ages, it's appropriate to talk about God's created intent for sex and sexuality in age-appropriate ways. Starting around age 9 (or earlier, if your child is asking questions, or you notice them beginning to practice peri-sexual behaviors such as masturbation, inappropriate touching or kissing, etc.), however, you'll want to talk with them about the cause-and-effect nature of misuses of sex and sexuality. At that age (or by no later than the onset of puberty), you'll also want to establish an ongoing conversation with them about what they're doing, and why they're doing it.



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