

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

There's No Way We Can Protect Kids All the Time



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It's a typical evening in the Miller household. Darrell and Charlene are having dinner with their sons Thomas and Jeremy, ages 9 and 6. The television on the kitchen counter drones mindlessly. Charlene likes to listen to the news. This evening's report begins with a news flash

"There is a scandal involving police officers having sex while on duty with two public safety dispatchers at the Torrington Police Department," the anchor reports as a transcript of dialogue scrolls across the screen. We're told that the sexual activities occurred in the women's locker room along with other "juicy" details about the investigation.

"What did the police do?" asks Thomas innocently as Jeremy listens intently.

"Nothing nice," says Darrell, flustered.

"Something bad?" Thomas asks.

"Err-rr ... eat your mashed potatoes, Thomas, they're getting cold. ... We'll talk about this later. ... And shut that darn thing off, Charlene!"

Maybe it's just me, but there's hardly a newscast (or any other show) without some mention of sexual predators or sexual misconduct. Whenever I hear these stories, I imagine what it would be like to be a child — innocently playing in the corner, but listening.

We've become pretty accustomed to this titillation. The Torrington police investigation doesn't rank along with big league stories like Sen. "wide stance" Larry Craig or the ever-fascinating "Clinton-Lewinsky cigar capers." But nearly every patient who entered my office the day after the broadcast had a comment about the officer-dispatcher's indiscretion. Is this news, voyeurism, or both?

My real concern is what do we do about the children who are exposed to this.

We know that children are naturally inquisitive. They take delight in all pleasurable sensations. Words for sex organs or elimination are often among the first acquired (wee-wee or pee-pee). If we had our druthers, how or when we discuss sex with our kids would be geared toward their age and developmental readiness. Unfortunately, the introduction of mature sexual content has become more the rule than the exception.

It's natural to want to protect our children from harm — but how? Placing them in a cocoon only increases their isolation and vulnerability — postponing the inevitable moment they emerge to face peer pressure.

I'm sadly reminded of my dear high school friend, Brenda. She was a shy girl with long curly chestnut brown hair who came from a strict but loving family. Brenda was an only child and the apple of her father's eye. She was forbidden to date until she was 16. Even in her teen years, her mom had to approve of her clothing. She never quite fit in with the "cool" kids and was the brunt of their jokes. Tragically, Brenda became pregnant with the first boy who showed an interest in her. She knew nothing about contraception. She committed suicide a few months later. She left a letter apologizing for the shame she brought to her family. I have no doubt Brenda's passing contributed to my decision to become a sex educator and therapist.

Whether you support "abstinence only" or "comprehensive sex education programs," I can tell you this — the lack of information in this highly sexualized society leaves kids over-stimulated and confused. How will they satisfy their hunger for clarity if not through their families? How did you learn the facts of life? Without accurate information in a safe nurturing context, our kids are left to fill in the blanks with their own active imaginations.

Sex, the good, the bad, and the ugly, is here to stay. If we don't like a broadcast — we can just turn it off. But we can't turn off life's media stream — even if we choose to.

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