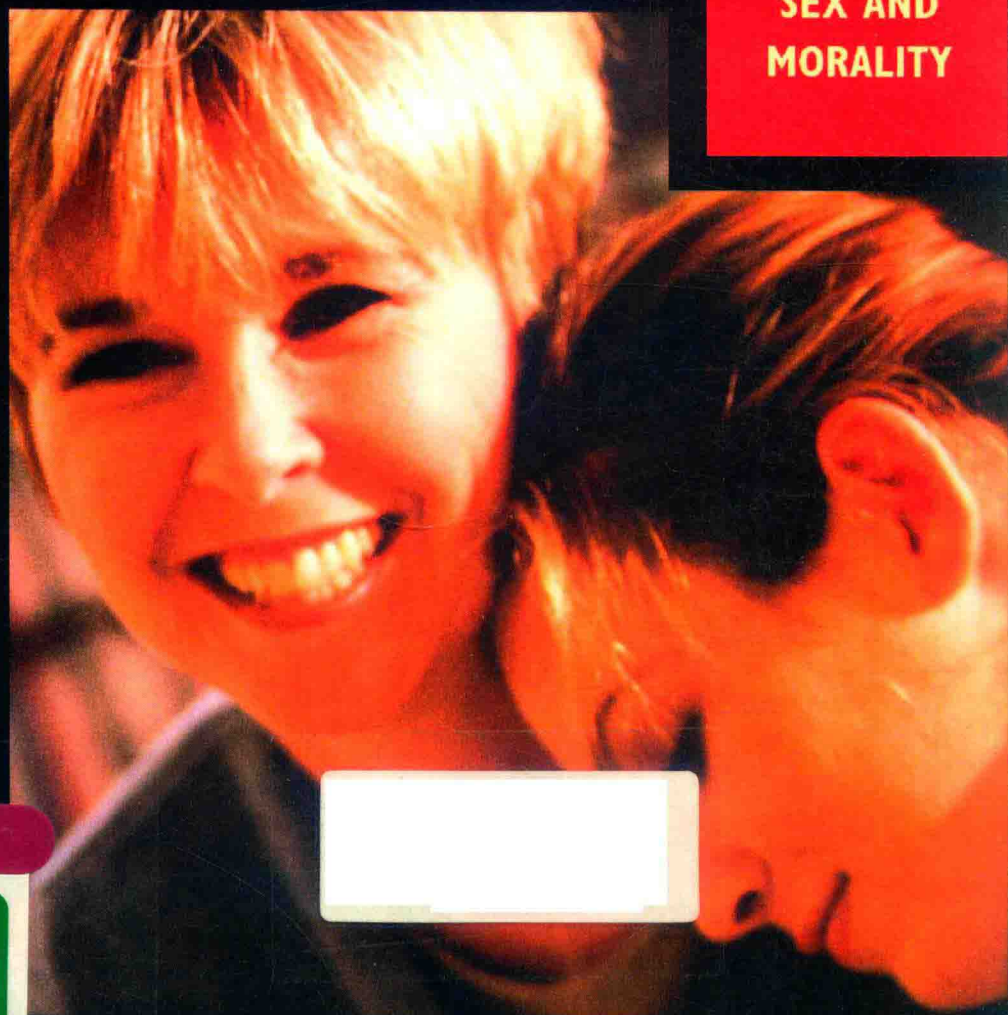


How Can We Talk About That?

Jane DiVita Woody, Ph.D., M.S.W.

OVERCOMING
PERSONAL
HANG-UPS
SO WE CAN
TEACH KIDS
THE RIGHT
STUFF ABOUT
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In memory of my parents, Benny and Josephine DiVita

*Dedicated to my husband, Robert Henley Woody,
and our adult children, Matt, Bob, and Jennifer*

Foreword

Whether as a function of shyness, conventional inhibitions, embarrassment, past sexual issues, or current problems, parents today generally have a difficult time speaking with their children about sex and sexuality. Probably it wasn't talked about much, if at all, at home when they were growing up, nor was much additional assistance provided by the programs they were exposed to as children. As a result, the first information children receive about sex typically does not come from their parents.

To remedy this situation, several major issues must be addressed. First of all, parents must be assisted in their efforts to break the pattern of silence, to overcome whatever hang-ups prevent them from speaking, and to learn how to communicate effectively with children regardless of their age. Parents then must have access both to information about sex and to effective techniques for sharing this information in meaningful ways with their children. And such an approach must also be able to fit in with their moral, spiritual, and religious values and beliefs. Ideally, parents should be provided with the tools to educate their children about sex in a positive manner, one that honors their personal values and encourages thoughtfulness, respect, and appropriate sexual behavior.

Successfully dealing with this complex combination of issues requires guidance from a person with a unique combination of knowledge and sensitivity, and Jane DiVita Woody is the ideal candidate

for the job. She brings to this formidable challenge the wisdom gathered from many years of experience as a sex education teacher, a trainer of sex educators, a researcher, a social worker, a family therapist, and a parent. By harnessing her skill for engaging writing and speaking clearly and understandably to a broad audience, she has written a book that is truly significant in several ways.

In Part One, she gives parents ideas and suggestions that help them to understand themselves more fully so they can move beyond their personal resistance to focus on the task of speaking with their children about sex. In subsequent chapters she offers a format for sex education that encourages parents to work together to educate their children at various ages and stages of development. Through the use of interactive activities such as role-playing and other exercises, Woody provides parents with a step-by-step program for working through their personal issues so they can practice *before* they preach. She also gives constant attention to the dynamics among family members and to their various backgrounds and the potentially different kinds of experience each may bring to the discussion. Perhaps most striking, she not only acknowledges and respects the importance of moral and spiritual values and beliefs relative to sex education, but offers suggestions that are open to personal interpretation from a wide variety of perspectives as well.

Much has been written about the need to improve sex education, but generally the focus is on programs developed through the schools. Little attention has been given to helping parents in their efforts to become effective sex educators for their children. *How Can We Talk About That?* helps parents feel empowered to handle this challenge and learn ways to take responsibility for teaching their children about sex and sexuality.

Dorothy S. Becvar, Ph.D.
President and CEO of The Haelan Centers
St. Louis, Missouri

Preface

Several years ago, while on sabbatical from the university, I was in Tallahassee, Florida, preparing to write a book on sexuality. The thrust of the book wasn't clear at first until one day when I read a letter to the editor of the local newspaper—suddenly a light bulb went on in my head and I knew that I had to focus on parents as sex educators for their children.

For several consecutive days, the newspaper had been reporting a dispute in mediation between two city police officers, male and female. The two had allegedly engaged in sex while on the job—in a cemetery. The male officer had been fired, and rumors surfaced that he had had the female officer get on her hands and knees and, during the course of a sexual interlude, made her bark like a dog. Confronted with this account, the male officer insisted that she had taken the initiative: she had unzipped his pants and begun performing the act, and he didn't remember how far it went. This testimony led to the next day's headline labeling him a "wronged man."

The story didn't end there, however. That same day, a mother wrote to the editor asking for help in explaining to her twelve- and fourteen-year-old daughters the meaning of the dog-barking, cemetery-sex story. She suggested that given the example set by adults, it was no wonder that children were out of control and had lost respect for their elders.¹ This mother found herself in the impossible situation of having to be a sex educator and moral guide for

her children and being unprepared for the job. She was probably thinking, How can I explain these sexual behaviors? I'm not even sure I understand them. How can I explain the irresponsibility of these adults? Their immorality? Police are supposed to be role models. What facts about sex should I pass on to my kids? What do I tell them about right and wrong and how to behave in regard to sex? How do I do all this when I'm so angry, disgusted, and confused?

The Tallahassee story pales in comparison to the media coverage of subsequent sex scandals among public officials and celebrities, especially the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and subsequent impeachment proceedings. Parents and commentators alike, outraged by the X-rated content on the evening news, wondered how to shield youth from the sordid details and hoped to escape questions about oral sex and semen on clothing. Emotions were palpable: clearly the public preferred that sex talk between parents and children be kept to a minimum and be left to parents' private discretion. It wasn't fair that these public sexual revelations had usurped the parental right to *avoid* sexual discussions.

I began to take heart from the media coverage of these sexual escapades: parents might actually benefit from a kick in the pants that would force them to discuss sexual matters in family talks. But parents' complaints about the prospect meant that they truly needed help—a lot of help. Because of my clinical experience over two decades in providing individual, marital, and sex therapy to many clients and teaching a graduate course in sexuality, I had an idea about the kind of help that might make a difference. It was simple: parents need to first resolve their own personal hang-ups before they can take a conscious and active role in their child's sexual and moral education. Even though the idea is simple and logical, the task itself is forbidding.

Another part of my strong commitment to this idea has personal roots. I knew that if I could learn to talk about sex with my husband and children and also to teach and counsel people about it, then anyone can learn to become more comfortable in parent-child sexual discussions. Growing up in a Catholic family with an over-

protective Sicilian father, I received a big dose of moral values and principles and almost no sexual information. And at that time, the lessons I did receive, plus the love and support my family showered on me, served me well. I knew the rules and lived by them, as did most other girls in my town.

Still, all the rules and taboos did not stop my curiosity about sex or my eagerness to learn. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Ovid's *Art of Love*, and other classic and contemporary novels unbelievably found their way into our immigrant home and into my adolescent hands. The excessive strictness I lived with didn't negate girlhood romantic fantasies, crushes, and longings. And it didn't keep me from exploring my own body and sexual response. But I definitely could have used some information and discussion to explain why my eleven-year-old girlfriend was raped, why our neighbor stood nude in front of the window of his house as kids made their daily trek to and from school, and why a local woman always dressed in men's clothing. Eventually I learned all this and much more on my own. But today it's far too risky to leave children ignorant of sexual facts when everything around them pushes them to learn on their own—from friends, the media, or trial-and-error experience.

These pages express other personal convictions. The first one is that I, like most parents, wish that I had done a better job with my own children's sex education. Looking back, I am satisfied with a lot of things: the books we read together when they were young, my consciously calm demeanor in certain situations, my insistence that they take the school sex education courses when available, my willingness to answer questions honestly, my respect for their privacy and offering books with comprehensive sex information, even into their college years. But I regret that we didn't talk more about the complexity of intimate sexual relationships, that I didn't ask about or respond more to their personal lives, and that I didn't tune into more opportunities for these talks.

Another personal motivation is my interest in understanding, uncovering, and dismantling the powerful emotions and beliefs that

keep parents more or less on the sidelines of their children's sex education. We watch the plays and moves, we worry, but we never quite get into the game ourselves. Even with the best of intentions and the desire to foster our children's sexual health and moral soundness, we often simply cannot break from the family history, past learning, and personality characteristics that make us hesitate and hold back. This unconscious reluctance is extreme for some parents, and I have wanted to better understand and address this topic for a long time.

Read on to discover ways to confront and conquer whatever hang-ups, big or small, might keep you wary of your child's sexual questions and concerns. Out of this endeavor, you can move toward a proactive rather than a reactive position and play a major role in fostering your child's positive sexual and moral development.

Jane DiVita Woody
Omaha, Nebraska

Author's Note

All of the clinical case vignettes and other anecdotes referred to in this book derive from my counseling, research, and teaching over several decades and typify concerns common to many people. To protect individuals' privacy and anonymity, I have changed names and details so that these stories represent composites and literary constructions. Any similarity of these names and stories to actual known individuals is purely coincidental.

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Many people have contributed encouragement, suggestions, and technical assistance that helped make this book a reality. I am deeply grateful for their interest in the idea and their faith in my ability to finish the project.

First, I want to thank my editor, Alan Rinzler, first for listening, understanding, and supporting the central idea behind the book. Once the project was under way, his superb editorial guidance and dedication enabled me to produce the finished product and meet deadlines.

Special thanks go to my colleagues at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, especially the College of Public Affairs and Community, which awarded me a sabbatical to get started on this project. Henry D'Souza and Robin Russel, my coinvestigators for the adolescent study mentioned in the book, also played a part in helping my ideas germinate. Henry and another colleague, Amanda Randall, also worked with me on a study dealing with mothers as sex educators for their children. I am grateful for the help provided by several graduate student assistants: Brett Phillips, Carol Hardy, Maggie Milner, and Brad Hove. Joyce Carson's expertise in word processing was a godsend as she helped me, in the final stages, put the manuscript into consistent computer files and formats. Throughout the years, too many students to name have reacted positively to my ideas about parents and sex education and often shared their own

experiences and stories, all of which helped clarify my approach to this book.

Beyond my workplace, there were others who supported this book in various ways. My dear friends and colleagues Jean Regester, Mary Springer, and Deborah Silver labored through early versions or excerpts and gave me valuable comments and suggestions. Father Robert Pagliari also carefully reviewed a recent version of the book and offered useful editorial guidance. Harvey Hester, a colleague in AASECT, meticulously read the previous version of the manuscript and offered both encouragement and thoughtful suggestions for style and content.

Finally, I am most appreciative of the energy and attention that my husband, Robert Woody, gave as he read more versions of this book than I care to acknowledge. His comments and suggestions were always on target and insightful. He also showed understanding and patience as much of my life became focused on deadlines and hours sitting at the word processor.

J.D.W.

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Introduction

I had always heard that you wait until your kids ask about sex and then you answer their questions. That's what I was prepared to do. The only thing is my boys are fourteen and sixteen; they never asked, and I don't think they will now.

Talking with kids about sex, answering their questions, keeping them from self-destructing over loves gained and lost—none of this has ever been easy. But now young people face a crisis they didn't create: every day, their current and future sexual health is at stake. But most of us parents just don't get it! We're still procrastinating or pussyfooting around with the facts of life and love, leaving our sex-crazed culture in charge of bringing up the kids. And many of us never ask, *Why am I so scared of this job?*

This book answers that question. After years of research, field work, counseling, and collective experience, I have concluded that personal hang-ups are behind most of our anxiety. The greatest obstacle to providing sexual health for the next generation is our own attitude. That's why it's up to us, the grown-ups, to get over our issues and unresolved conflicts about sex so that we can provide better guidance and inspiration to our children. This book offers a plan to do exactly that. Now, by working through the first three chapters in sequence, you can learn to overcome these hang-ups and give

your children a better sex education and greater hope for sexual health than we ever got.

Have you talked with your teen about sexual intercourse (or even said the word to him or her), its risks, and your values with regard to it? Have you mentioned that over two million teens a year contract a sexually transmitted disease? Have you told your son what to expect at puberty? Do you let your preteen daughter dress in sexy styles but leave her uninformed about her sexual organs?

Even if you have had a talk, or even several, you are still not finished. Like most people, you probably contend with a rush of feelings—embarrassment, irritation, anxiety. Maybe you try to talk, but the words don't come out right. Or you cut the conversation short. Or you say, "Go ask your mother [or father]."

These uncomfortable feelings and reactions of inertia, avoidance, and procrastination connect to issues in your own life. The purpose of this book is to show you what to do about them. I believe that once you face and overcome your personal hang-ups, you can then get on with the business of teaching your child the right stuff about sex and morality. And don't worry—this doesn't mean talking to your kids about your sex life! In this case, as in many others, good boundaries between parents and children remain important. Rather, it means taking an honest look at yourself—past and present—and coming to terms with what you find.

- Did I make sexual mistakes as a young person?
- Do I want my child to do it differently?
- Do I now have a good sexual relationship with a loving partner?
- Am I clear on my beliefs about sex and morality, for myself? For my child?

These are just a few of the questions that parents don't want to think about. But getting answers is the key to being straight with

kids about the facts of life in a way that will keep them listening. Most parents want to achieve this goal and are willing to figure out why they are so emotional about their kids' sexual concerns and questions. In the past, sex experts have discounted parents' emotional reactions and offered simplistic advice: take a more disinterested approach toward sex, learn the facts about sex, talk to your kids about sex in spite of your discomfort and embarrassment. But until now, no one has ever suggested that parents' ambivalence about sex is what renders them dumbfounded or paralyzed by their children's coming of age, and parents need more than simple platitudes to get beyond that.

This book supplies the missing piece to the puzzle of why parents bail out even when youngsters face the sexual perils of today's culture. Overcoming your hang-ups will help you figure out what you want teach your kids about sex and morality and free you up to learn how to do it well.

Modern life has created sexual risks for young people that were unimaginable a decade ago. Unfortunately, most of our kids face these issues alone or with the "help" of their friends. The reason: many parents remain unable or unwilling to teach their kids sexual survival skills for the twenty-first century. Too often, even today, the major approach to family-based sex education is "Don't ask, don't tell." And our society and culture, instead of offering meaningful help to change this pattern, are a big part of the problem. The offerings of the media and politicians have the effect of keeping sexual preoccupation high but sexual ignorance and confusion even higher. Although many parents would like to give their kids a better sex education than they themselves had, they don't know how, primarily because they haven't a clue as to why they avoid or bypass this aspect of parenting.

Now, for the first time, a real solution is at hand, and it isn't merely to latch on to buzzwords like *abstinence* or *safer sex*. This book guides you through the steps to becoming a credible sex educator and moral guide for your child. In taking on the mission to

foster sexual health for the next generation, you gain two added benefits: you can improve your own sex life and contribute to the overall sexual health of our society.

Kids in Crisis

Today the sexual health of young people in the United States and in most industrialized countries in the world is at risk. Conditions in modern society propel children toward sexual decisions and behaviors that can harm their physical and mental health and leave lifelong scars. The media, the changing structure of family life, and the new teen culture push kids to grow up fast and take on adult behaviors, including sexual relationships, before they are ready in mind, body, heart, and spirit. Parents need to take a critical yet clear-eyed look at the confusing and dangerous environment young people face every day.

Brave New World

There are great advantages to being alive at the dawn of the twenty-first century, but the complexity of this age calls for new skills to cope with how this changed world affects sexuality. Sexual messages of every shape and form constantly tantalize and promise sweet rewards. So-called mature adults struggle every day with sexual issues that bring them or their families much misery—affairs, unwanted pregnancy, obsession with pornography, compulsive sexual behavior, and criminal sexual acts. If adults succumb without quite knowing what hit them, how much more vulnerable are youth in this same environment?

Through every media venue, children are constantly exposed to sexual images, messages, topics, and innuendo. The parents who cringe at the thought of their child asking about a high-profile sex scandal apparently remain unaware that children already have daily access to a steady diet of sensational, demeaning, trivial, superficial, stereotyped, and overly romantic notions about sexuality. Because