



Session 1

ENCOURAGING YOUR KIDS

Reflect

1 Thessalonians 5:11-14 NLT

So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing. Dear brothers and sisters, honor those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and warn you against all that is wrong. Think highly of them and give them your wholehearted love because of their work. And remember to live peaceably with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone.

Encourage and build each other up

Like it or not, you are your children's number one role model. The way you live your life ends up being the biggest influence on their behavior. Your children have been commanded by God to honor and respect you! Even if it appears that they could care less what you think, they are following your example in one way or another.

Because you are an adult, they probably hold you to a higher standard than they hold themselves. So if they see you swear or tear people down occasionally, they'll think it's okay for them to do it as well, and probably a lot more frequently. You have had a few more years to mature, right? So they may be thinking that they do not need to measure up to your standards. They expect you to "act like an adult!" If you're not living at a higher standard, then they may lower their own personal standards in comparison to yours. Ask God to give you the strength to be a shining example of his son Jesus Christ and allow his light to shine brightly through you to your family.

What's wrong with forcing abstinence?

Protecting children starts off relatively easy. “Don’t touch the stove.” “Stay out of the street.” “Never play with daddy’s razor.” As the years pass, however, things get much more complicated, especially when our children morph into aliens (a process also known as *puberty*).

It can be a defining moment of sorts when you realize your daughter is blossoming into a beautiful young woman, or your son’s once squeaky voice is now deep and manly. And just when exactly did they decide that the opposite sex no longer has “cooties”? Life was easier when our daughters thought that boys were stinky and our sons were convinced that girls were no fun.

Some parents think it’s cute when their child comes home from school with a crush. Others get sweaty palms and shortness of breath! Perhaps one parent remembers the innocence of his own childhood and easily accepts his child’s newfound attractions, while another parent is haunted by the sexual deviance of his youth and fears the same fate for his son or daughter. The reality is our children should never be made to feel guilty about their natural desires. At the same time, we should not be naive about the pressures and temptations those emotions bring.

These statistics about America’s youth will either shock you or confirm your preexisting concerns. Based on a national research and analysis report published in 2005 by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation:¹

- Nearly half of all high school students (9th through 12th grade) are sexually active.
- Approximately one-third of young women get pregnant before age 20.
- Around 10 percent of girls and boys have sex before turning 14.
- Eighteen percent of high school boys and 11 percent of high school girls have had four or more sexual partners by the time they graduate.

- Approximately one in four sexually active teens contracts an STD (sexually transmitted disease) every year.
- An estimated half of all new HIV infections occur in people under the age of 25.
- Nearly one in four high school students claim they feel pressured to have sex.
- One in four teens report that they “did something sexually they did not really want to do” as a result of feeling pressured.
- One in ten high school students reveal they have been forced to have sex against their will at some point.

Forced abstinence

Those statistics can make a parent panic! For many of us, the obvious solution is to set stringent boundaries for our children. If the opposite sex can’t get to them, they can’t have sex with them! Sounds reasonable enough—we’ll rule with an iron fist and *make* our teenagers stay abstinent.

There’s just one little problem with this philosophy that can equate to huge disappointments later. *We really can’t make our children abstain from sex.* Oh sure, we can attempt to monitor their every move and watch them like a hawk, but if they are truly determined to have sex, can we really guarantee they won’t find a way?

Think back to your own childhood. Did you ever manage to get around your parents’ boundaries, discover a convenient loophole in the system?

The point I’m making is this: *if our only tactic for keeping our kids sexually abstinent is to make sure they never have the opportunity, we are underestimating our children’s ability to find a way around our boundaries.*

Freewill: A beauty and a beast

Doesn't it just melt your heart when your little one unexpectedly plants a hug or a kiss on you? Perhaps it downright blows your mind when your teenager initiates affection, but the point is it feels really good when our kids express love simply because *they want to*. Unfortunately the beauty of our child's free will can become a beast when it's turned against our wishes, when they use it to oppose us.

You may be surprised to hear that your child's power of choice is actually an asset when it comes to abstinence. Nothing causes your kid's ears to perk up as much as when he or she hears you say, "The choice is yours."

We do our children no favors by adopting a philosophy that welcomes them to go out and have sex if they want to! But let's not run into the other ditch either, where we deceive ourselves into thinking we actually have the ability to make our kids' decisions for them. *As parents, we have the power to enforce abstinence, but very little power to force it. Do you see the difference?*

It's one thing to implement structured boundaries that help guide our kids. It's another thing to parent with a controlling spirit that seeks to drive our kids. *As parents, we make up the rules of the road, but our children ultimately hold the steering wheel in their life decisions.*

If parents are too restrictive and controlling, that correlates with [their children's] depression and other disorders, possibly resulting in adolescents who habitually deceive their parents. Parental monitoring may be harmful when, instead of indicating a warm connection with the adolescent, it derives from harsh suspicion.²

When it comes to sex, we can threaten our kids. "So help me, you're gonna be a virgin until the day you're married!" Or we can motivate them. "Your virginity is yours to protect. Only you have the power to save it as a special gift for your spouse,"—same end-goal, two totally different approaches.

Children with controlling parents look for the first opportunity to prove Mom and Dad wrong. They will be inclined to have sex just to make the point that we can't stop them. That's a terrible motive for having sex, isn't it?

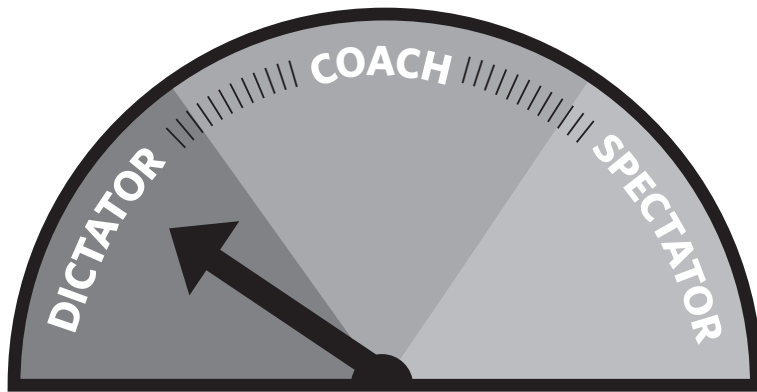
Controlling parents may appear unloving, but in reality, it is usually their love for their sons or daughters that compels them. They are so afraid of something bad happening to their children that they compensate with unreasonable domination.

Freedom from controlling parenting is found when we read and believe Scriptures like **Proverbs 22:6**, "***Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.***" You see, we're to teach our children to choose the right path, not to overbearingly *choose it for them*.

The other end of the spectrum

On one hand, we have the parent who seeks to force abstinence. On the other hand, we have the parent who concludes, "Who am I to tell my child not to have sex? He's going to do what he wants to anyway." This parent is failing to provide leadership through clearly stated expectations. We have a parental responsibility to teach our kids the truth about sex. In short, *we should set the standard for our kids, and then get busy cultivating standards in our kids.*

When [parental] monitoring is part of a warm, supportive [parent/child] relationship, the child is likely to become a confident, well-educated adult, avoiding drug use and risky sex.³



As parents, we cannot afford to be dictators or spectators. Perhaps an accurate word picture for effective, balanced parenting is that of a coach. We train, educate, discipline, and encourage so that, when our kids step onto the field of life, leaving us to watch patiently from the sidelines, we know we've imparted the spiritual insight and maturity they need to succeed.

Summary

Can we agree that abstinence is ultimately our children's free will decision and that we do not have the power to force it on them? Can we also agree that we have a responsibility to equip our kids with truths about sex that will protect and prepare them for the future? Finally, can we check off on the fact that we are going to have to examine our own parenting techniques before we can effectively inspire abstinence in our kids? If so, we're ready for the next lesson. In the meantime, give some thought to the following questions.

1. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "U.S. Teen Sexual Activity" (Menlo Park, CA: January 2005), 1-2; <http://www.kff.org/youthhivstds/upload/U-S-Teen-Sexual-Activity-Fact-Sheet.pdf> (accessed 22 Oct 2008).
2. Kathleen Stassen Berger, *the Developing Person Through the Lifespan*, 7th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008), 422.
3. Berger, 421.

Answer

1. What is your current plan for keeping your child abstinent?
2. Is your parenting approach more like a dictator, a spectator, or a coach? Was this how you were raised?
3. How are we, as parents, setting ourselves up for failure by attempting to force abstinence on our kids?
4. Whose behavior do you focus on the most: yours or your child's? Explain why.
5. What in this text stood out to you the most and why? What do you plan to do as a result?

Pray

Father, please help me to serve as a godly role model for my child. Show me how to parent in faith, rather than fear and domination. Lead me by Your Spirit as I, in turn, lead my child. Amen.