

## **Talking to Your Kids About Masturbation**

*By Jim Liebelt*

Many parents struggle when it comes to talking to their kids about sex and sexuality. So as you can imagine, when it comes to specifically addressing the topic of masturbation with kids, most parents don't know what to say.

Still, this is one topic that parents should take a proactive approach to discussing with their kids. Why? The best information we have indicates that a majority of girls, and almost all boys, will have had a masturbatory experience by the time they reach the age of 18. Further, since masturbation is a topic so often shrouded in secrecy, teens – particularly Christian teens – often struggle with guilt as they attempt to reconcile their behavior with their faith.

Parents who talk to their kids about masturbation can help them develop a better, healthier sexuality. But what should parents actually say to their kids?

Before we get around to answering that question, let's first take a look at some information about masturbation.

- **Even young children are curious about their bodies.** It's normal for young children to explore their own bodies and in doing so, they learn that touching their "private" areas makes them feel good. God created our bodies to respond sexually, so there is nothing impure about kids finding out that their bodies respond in this way. While it is unusual for children to masturbate to the point of an orgasm, it is not at all unusual for them to fondle themselves from time to time.
- **As hormone levels increase in early adolescence, masturbation becomes a normal experience.** As noted earlier, almost all boys and a majority of girls will have had a masturbatory experience by the age of 18. It's important to keep in mind, however, that kids who do not have a masturbation experience are not "abnormal."
- **Masturbation does not result in negative physical reactions.** Kids who masturbate will not go blind, grow hair on their palms or become sterile. These are simply myths.
- **The Bible is silent on the topic of masturbation.** The issue would be much easier for parents to handle if the Bible said, "Thou shalt not" or "Thou shall," but it doesn't. Some have used the account of Onan found in the book of Genesis (chapter 38) to claim that masturbation is a Biblically-prohibited behavior. This is a stretch however. In this account, Onan interrupts sexual intercourse and spills his semen on the ground so as not to impregnate his sister-in-law. His brother had died and in those days, it was a brother's duty to produce children on behalf of the deceased, so that the family line would

continue. It appears beyond the context of the Genesis passage to apply a specific prohibition concerning masturbation on the basis of this account.

- **The Bible does address the issue of lust.** While the act of masturbation may not be inherently sinful, the thoughts of a person engaged in the behavior matter. In Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Clearly, uncontrolled fantasy and lustful thoughts – which may be connected to the act of masturbation – are sinful.

- **The Christian community is divided on the issue of masturbation.** There is no unified position on masturbation within the Christian community. Author David Wilkerson once wrote in his book *This is Loving?* “Masturbation is not a gift from God for sexual desires. Masturbation is not moral behavior and is not condoned in the Scriptures.” On the other hand, Charlie Shedd, a long-respected Christian authority on sex and dating once wrote, “Masturbation can be a positive factor in your total development” and that “teenage masturbation is preferable to teenage intercourse.”

- **Masturbation can become a compulsive behavior.** Especially when tied to pornography or used as a coping skill, masturbation often can cross the line into obsessive-compulsive behavior. As a result, uncontrolled masturbation can be extremely negative.

- **Masturbation can lead to the use of pornography.** It’s not uncommon for pornographic material to be introduced into the act of masturbation. When this occurs, the act becomes connected to lust – and again – sin.

Now, let’s look briefly at how parents can talk to their kids about masturbation.

- **Masturbation should be just one topic in an ongoing discussion parents have about sexuality with their kids.** There are many topics under the umbrella of sexuality that parents should discuss with their kids. Masturbation is just one of these. Parents don’t have to talk to their kids regularly about this topic, unless it’s a behavior with which their kids have a continuing struggle. But masturbation definitely should be on the menu of sexual topics to cover.

- **Use an age-appropriate approach.** For younger children, parents don’t have to talk in depth about the subject of masturbation. Simply talking to your kids about how God has designed our bodies, that sexual stimulation feels good, and how fondling oneself is normal, yet needs to be controlled, is probably all that is necessary. You might consider purchasing a Christian, age-appropriate resource to use as a means of teaching younger kids about sexuality. *God’s Design for Sex*, a series of four age-appropriate books, published by NavPress is one such resource. As kids approach adolescence, a more direct and frank discussion about masturbation is in order. (Note that the fourth and last book of *God’s Design for Sex*, written for ages 11-14, comments on the subject similarly to what we’ve just addressed.)

• **Give your kids the truth about masturbation.** In discussing the topic with your kids, utilize the above information about masturbation. Telling adolescents that they are normal if they've had this experience will go a long way in helping them build a healthy self-esteem. For kids who have had a masturbatory experience, reassuring them that they are normal can help ease the guilt they might feel from thinking they might be the only one who has done this.

• **Equip your kids with a healthy, Biblical sexuality.** Sexuality is a dominant issue in our adolescents' lives. Give them the tools they need, including information about the Biblical view of sexuality that addresses issues of purity, lust and self-control, in order to make wise and God-honoring decisions in this area. Also make sure you talk to your kids about repentance and God's forgiveness, should they be struggling with sexual sin.

• **Respect your adolescent's privacy.** Unless your adolescent son or daughter is really struggling with masturbation, allow him or her to maintain an appropriate sense of privacy. A good example of this would be always knocking on a closed bedroom door before entering. Threatening the removal of privacy should be a last resort and reserved only for those kids who are involved in obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Although masturbation might be among the most sensitive issues you will ever discuss with your children, being proactive in this area could well be one of the best steps you can take to help your kids mature into healthy, well-balanced adults. Your willingness to talk about masturbation, while potentially resulting in some embarrassment for both parent and child, will speak volumes to your kids that no area of their lives is off-limits or unimportant.

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