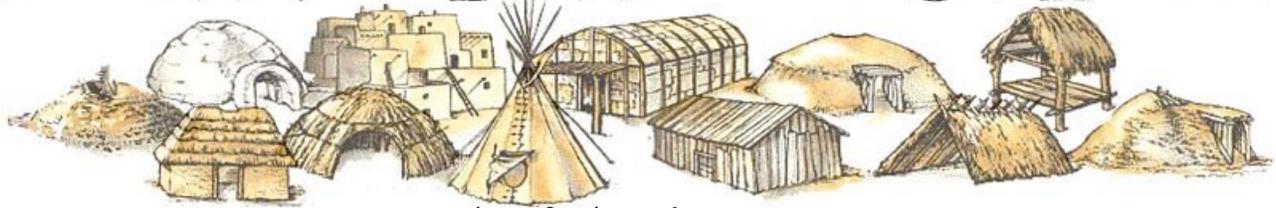


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## The Value of Values

There's all this talk about teaching "values" around sexuality: sharing family "values"; respecting that the "values" of others may be different; acting on one's personal "values." **Just what are these things called "values" anyway?** Where do they come from? Do they change over time, and if so, does that mean they weren't really "values" in the first place?

**Values are personal truths upon which we base our life decisions.**

We may not recall consciously choosing our values: they just seem to be there, influencing our attitudes and behaviors. With such vagueness about values, we can have difficulty explaining them to children. Parents may have little experience defining or examining their values around sexuality, so attitudes and beliefs may be passed on without much active discussion.

It's important to revisit our core beliefs from time to time; to clarify, alter if necessary, and reaffirm what is true for us. This can be scary, since it forces us to examine what we say we value and what we truly value. It also makes us face how well our behaviors match our beliefs. This process of "e - value - ation" allows us to better guide our children in developing their own personal values about sexuality.

**This process is healthy** - and sometimes painful - as people examine long accepted codes. Families confront the possibility that the kids' values may not always line up with the folks'. And it's incredibly enriching to discover there is common ground.



We teach children values around sexuality through words, but perhaps **more importantly by modeling behaviors we see as right and just.** Participation in cultural activities and ceremony together can strengthen your relationship with your teen. As Native people, we appreciate the value of leading by example and our youth need us to set that example for them.

Media and peers also promote values (or lack of) in the messages they deliver. Moving toward independence, teens need opportunities to question, examine, and test values. Then they can freely and consciously form their personal value system. This allows them to truly "own" their values - to have the conviction to live by them.

It's a difficult balance for parents: striving to support sons and daughters in choosing their own values, while at the same time offering input and guidance. It requires trust that children are capable of choosing values that will work well for them in their lives.



**We can help our teens by communicating openly about issues such as love, relationships, sexual intimacy, birth control, sexual orientation, abortion, pregnancy, parenting, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. Parents and teens need the freedom to express to one another what they know, feel, value and expect around each of these issues.**

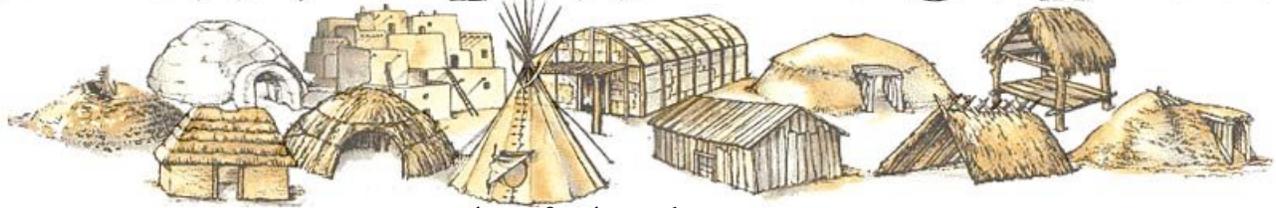
The following exercise can help in clarifying values around sexuality. Parents can do it alone or with their teens.

**For each statement, explain why you agree, feel neutral, or disagree:**

- *Sex outside of marriage is wrong.*
- *Teens should have access to birth control without parental consent.*
- *Abortion should be legal.*
- *If a 15-year-old becomes pregnant, she should place the baby for adoption.*
- *Gay and lesbian couples should have the freedom to marry.*

Your 12th grader's decisions around sexuality will be greatly affected by the ability to clarify, express, affirm and act on personal values. These are skills which improve with practice. If parents encourage such practice within the safety of the family, they better prepare their teen for life beyond high school.

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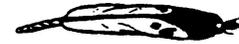
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## Deciding About Sex



Teens may think the only choice to be made about sex is: "Should I or shouldn't I?" But in reality, **sexual decision-making involves a lot more than merely deciding whether to have sex, and if so, when and with whom.**

Life after high school brings increasing opportunities to decide about sex. If your family hasn't addressed this issue thoroughly, **NOW IS THE TIME!** Avoiding open discussion about sexual decisions only serves to leave young people unprepared. For teens, it can be incredibly complicated... so many conflicting messages from "Just say 'no'" to "Go for it!" No wonder they're confused. In fact, that's a good place to begin a conversation with your teen about this whole business of sexual decision-making. Consider using the following exercise:

### You and your teen complete these statements:

#### About sexual intercourse,

my parents tell me \_\_\_\_\_  
my friends tell me \_\_\_\_\_  
my religion tells me \_\_\_\_\_  
the media tells me \_\_\_\_\_  
I believe \_\_\_\_\_

### Discussion questions:

How do the messages differ? What conflict can this cause? How might the conflict be resolved? Who can assist?

**Repeat the process for several topics, including relationships, sexual intimacy, birth control, abortion, sexual orientation, etc.** This isn't about who's right or wrong; it's about identifying and evaluating the range of sexual messages out there. Ultimately your teen must clarify what s/he truly believes. Only then can there be informed and thoughtful decision-making.

This exercise requires safety to address such personal issues. To create that safety, establish some agreements, for example:

1. Our discussion is confidential.
2. You can speak honestly, without fear of consequence.
3. You have the right to speak without interruption.
4. You may pass at any time.

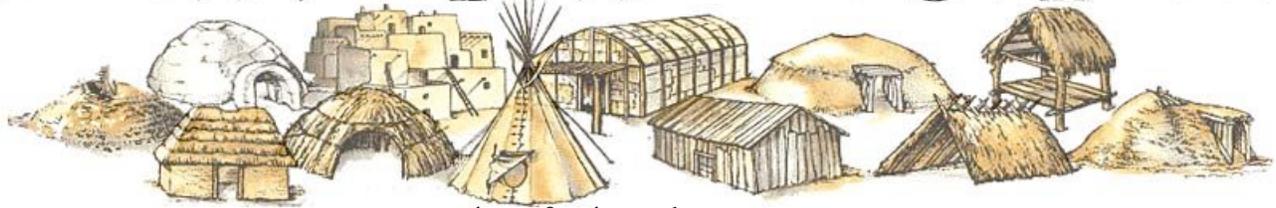
(NOTE: Establish only those agreements that you and your teen will honor and follow. If you have difficulty with agreements, consider asking for assistance from a third party, like a family friend or counselor.)

### A little help: What you might say to your teen...

- ⊕ "Your body belongs to you. You decide how to express yourself, sexually and otherwise."
- ⊕ "Right now, you have the ability to say 'yes' or 'no' to sexual expression, regardless of pressure you may feel from your peers, your parents - whoever - to make the decision they want you to make. Ultimately it's up to you. Whatever you decide, choose thoughtfully."
- ⊕ "Consider how you make your decisions. If it's by impulse, have you truly thought things through? If your judgment is clouded (by drugs, alcohol, stress, etc.), how might this affect your decisions? If you let someone else decide for you, do you risk going against what you really believe and feel? If you don't make and clearly express a decision, might this encourage someone else to step in and decide for you? If you evaluate options and then decide, how might that increase your power to make choices that are consistent with your personal values?"

Important decisions in life deserve thought, evaluation, and careful consideration. Help your teen appreciate that personal power, freedom and self-respect come from taking charge of one's life choices. Sexual decision-making is a very big deal for teenagers today. What's sad is that most are totally unprepared for the challenge. Your teen needn't be one of them.

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## Cleaning Up the Myths about Two-spiritedness (Homosexuality) – a Father's Story

When my son John asked to talk to me about a friend he was worried about - a friend with a problem - I got worried. As a kid, whenever I was in trouble and needed answers, I never admitted I was the one with the problem. It was always, "I've got this 'friend,' and he's got this problem..."

**"He thinks he might be gay, Dad,"** John continued.

**"Who?"** I almost *demanded*. I wanted to shout, "John, who are we *really* talking about here?" But I contained myself. I value the openness John and I share... on lots of issues, including sexuality. I didn't want to jeopardize that now.

**"I don't want to say, Dad. But I need to talk about it. All I ever hear about gay people are crude jokes and negative comments. Some people are pretty hateful. Maybe they just don't understand. I don't understand... and I'm not sure what to do for my friend."**

The tradition of condemning homosexuality is firmly embedded in mainstream culture, but not in our Native culture. Native people have traditionally recognized that all members of the community have a special role to play. Two-spirited men and women, people who are gay or lesbian, are commonly believed to be gifted with special medicine and insight. Unfortunately, assimilation has overtaken many Native beliefs and often two-spirited people in our tribes and communities feel rejected. AIDS has added fuel to the fire of homophobia - fear and hostility toward people who are gay or lesbian. The result has been even less tolerance.

Struggling to gain comfort with their own sexuality, teens are especially uncomfortable with the subject of homosexuality. Yet they're intensely curious... about what it means to be gay; what "causes" it, how to tell if someone is gay, etc.

I told John all I knew about the subject, which I confess wasn't much. **He was surprised to hear that many children and adolescents have some kind of sexual experience with persons of the same gender - whether it be "playing doctor," sexual touching... or strong feelings of attraction and sexual fantasies. Such experiences and feelings are common, normal, and not necessarily proof that one is gay.**



***"There are a lot of theories, John, but no one knows what 'causes' someone to be either homosexual or heterosexual. Evidence shows that being gay isn't a choice... rather it's a compelling, deeply held orientation. We may not understand... and we don't have to. Their relationships can be just as loving, genuine and fulfilling to them as ours can be to us."***



**"We also know that sexual orientation isn't contagious. Having a gay teacher, coach, or even a parent doesn't 'turn' someone gay."**

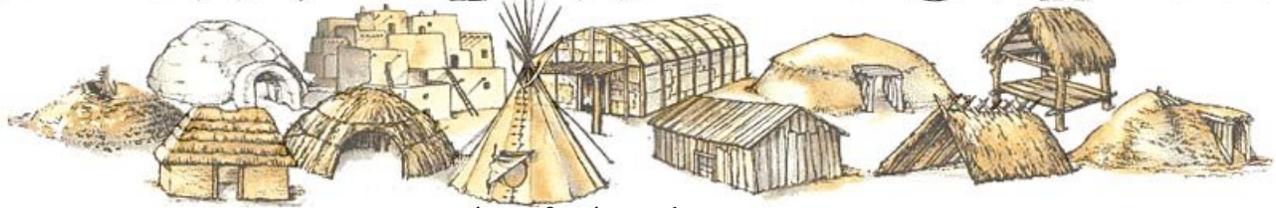
I told John that I believe hatred and discrimination against gay (two-spirited) people are wrong. **Differences don't justify mistreatment.**

It turned out John really *was* asking about a friend. But what if he wasn't? I think of all those young people out there feeling confused, ashamed; alienated from their peers, alone with their secret; fearing rejection from their family and friends. And no one to talk to.

The existence of gay youth is often denied. Think about it... sex education, if it happens at all, is phrased almost exclusively in heterosexual terms. In avoiding open, honest discussion, we allow for continued misunderstanding, mistrust, fear, isolation. **If we say nothing to our youth about this topic, that in itself speaks volumes.**

So I encourage you, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other caring adults... John, his friend, and all those like him encourage you... to speak with your teens about sexual orientation. Out of respect for our people, culture, and traditions, we have a responsibility to teach tolerance and understanding to our Native youth. Every member of our community needs to be valued for their special gifts the Great Spirit gave them.

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## Take Care: Encouraging Sexual Health

Even those committed to a healthy lifestyle often neglect their sexual health. For example, how many women are diligent about their routine Pap and pelvic exam - or practice monthly breast self exam? How many men perform (or even know about) testicular self-exam? Yet, testicular cancer is one of the most common cancers in males aged 15-34. Learning how to examine the testes properly can be a life saving skill.

Neglect of sexual health is an extension of discomfort about sexuality in general. Embarrassment around touching, examining or paying attention to our sexual anatomy contributes to poor health habits. These include reluctance to practice good reproductive health care (routine exams, treatment for sexually transmitted infections, and appropriate use of protection).

**As you promote positive behaviors around sexuality with your family, include support for sexual health.**

### Young Women – Gynecological Exam and Breast Self-Exam

Women should start having Pap tests three years after they begin having vaginal intercourse, or when they become 21 years old (whether or not they have had vaginal intercourse). Discussing both the value and specifics of gynecological care with your daughter can ease anxiety. It also helps establish a positive attitude toward sexual health.

**Explain that the purpose of a gynecological exam is to see if the reproductive organs are healthy, and to detect any problems early on. The Pap test is a simple test in which a sample of cells from the cervix (neck of the uterus) is examined for irregularities. Since Pap tests first became available as a screening tool in 1941, deaths due to cervical cancer have fallen 70%! Annual Paps are one of the most important ways a woman can care for her sexual health.**

The first annual exam can have tremendous impact on attitudes toward and comfort with sexual health care. Parents help create a more positive experience by preparing their daughters. **“Pelvic Exam: Your Key to Good Health”** is an excellent Planned Parenthood pamphlet, designed to inform and support young women in safeguarding their reproductive health.

Help your daughter appreciate that she can take charge of these health issues. Encourage her to track her menstrual/moon cycle, noting any problems or changes. Promote monthly breast self-exam (BSE). Breast cancer

affects 1 in 8 women; with BSE, a young woman may detect a potentially dangerous breast lump early on.

### Young men – Testicular Self-Exam

Young men should be taught about the importance of testicular self-exam (TSE) for the early detection of testicular cancer. Studies show that most young men know little about TSE, yet have significant fears about contracting testicular cancer. Found early and treated promptly, there is an excellent chance for cure. But the mildness of early symptoms, ignorance, fear, and denial are factors which may cause adolescents to delay seeking medical attention.

### Annual Physicals – Encourage your teen to ask questions

Embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and many other factors often keep adolescents (and even adults) from seeking necessary medical attention for sexual health issues such as unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, etc. You can help prepare your teen for a healthy adult life by supporting him or her to visit the doctor for annual physicals alone. Encourage your teen to ask the doctor questions about body changes and concerns. This allows your teen to ask questions that s/he may not feel comfortable asking with you in the room. Additionally, your teen will feel more in control of his/ her health...a step towards being a healthy adult. Educate and support your teen in all areas of living a healthy life, including sexual health.

**Helpful Hint:** Often adults who didn't learn about sexual health as teens have difficulty talking to their young people about it. There are many ways to learn about sexual health, both for yourself and your teen. Your local Indian Health Service, Urban Indian Health Center, and Planned Parenthood are good first places to look for information about sexual health. Tribal Resource centers as well as local libraries often have books on taking care of your sexual health.

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## Ideas for communicating

### A Letter of Love

Sometimes it's difficult to verbalize our deepest feelings. Some parents find it helpful to write a letter to their children, expressing their feelings, concerns, and hopes for them. If you choose to do this, remember to keep it positive and loving but don't be afraid to share your fears or the learning from your own teenage years. Here are some ideas you might want to talk about in your letter:

- Your love for your child
- The difficulty you sometimes face in accepting that s/he is growing up and growing into sexuality
- Your respect for him/her as a young adult and your hope that s/he will keep certain values in mind when making decisions
- Explain that "Your decisions about sex are yours and yours alone. Whatever you choose, choose responsibly."
- Your expectations that s/he will be thoughtful, respectful and honorable in sexual decision-making
- Love and sex are not one and the same... remind your child to never confuse them, or misrepresent them to another.
- If s/he is confused, hurt or stuck over any issue - whether it be related to sex, friends, school... whatever... you will be there for support.

### Sexuality is such a complex issue, at any age.

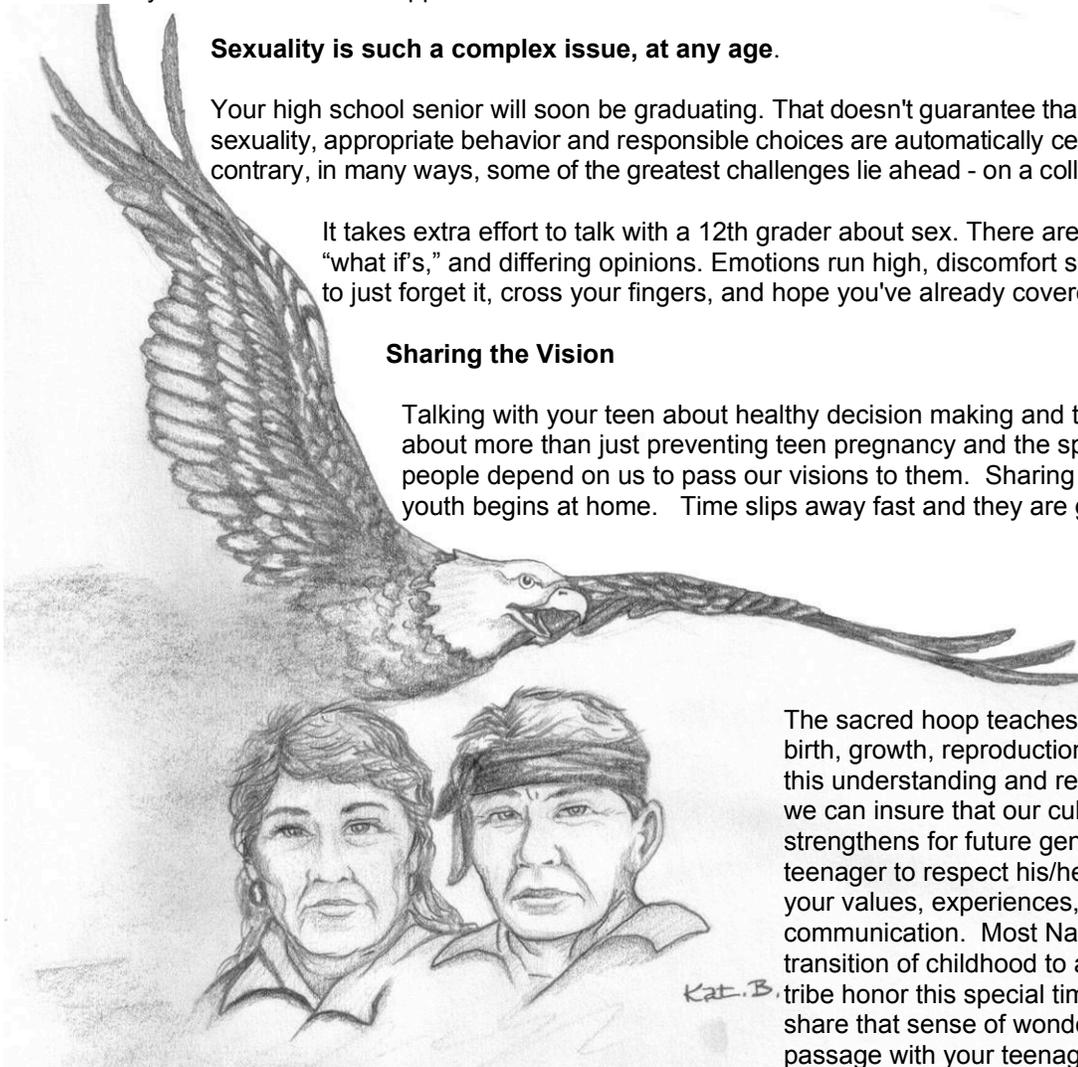
Your high school senior will soon be graduating. That doesn't guarantee that rational thought about sexuality, appropriate behavior and responsible choices are automatically cemented in place. On the contrary, in many ways, some of the greatest challenges lie ahead - on a college campus and beyond.

It takes extra effort to talk with a 12th grader about sex. There are so many shades of gray, "what if's," and differing opinions. Emotions run high, discomfort sets in. Sometimes it's easier to just forget it, cross your fingers, and hope you've already covered it all.

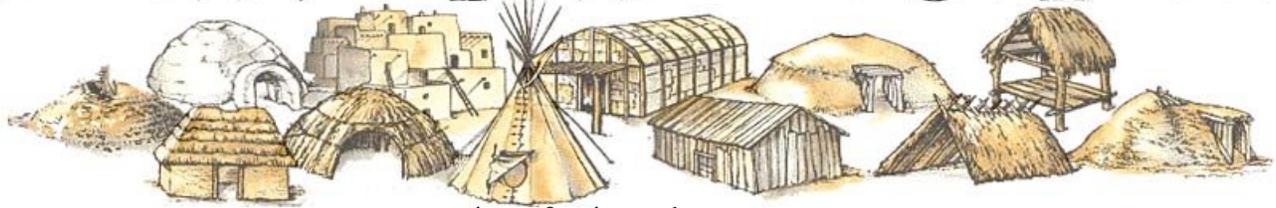
### Sharing the Vision

Talking with your teen about healthy decision making and transitioning into adulthood is about more than just preventing teen pregnancy and the spread of disease. Our young people depend on us to pass our visions to them. Sharing our Native culture with our youth begins at home. Time slips away fast and they are grown before you know it.

The sacred hoop teaches us to honor the cycles of birth, growth, reproduction, and aging. If we can share this understanding and respect for life with our youth, we can insure that our culture stays strong and strengthens for future generations. Encourage your teenager to respect his/her self and culture by sharing your values, experiences, and traditions through open communication. Most Native cultures celebrate the transition of childhood to adulthood. How does your tribe honor this special time for youth? How can you share that sense of wonder and respect of this rite of passage with your teenager?



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## A Native Mother's Story

I grew up in a small town in the 60's and 70's when sex education just started to be a part of the school's extra curriculum. We had to get our parent's permission to watch sex education videos or talk in class about how a baby is born. In our home, just like the norm at that time, my parents didn't talk about sex. It was a taboo and remained unmentioned. I learned about sex education from my friends, books, TV, movies, and some from school, but not from my parents. My mom called boys and girl's private parts "hotdogs" and "hamburgers". When I was old enough to start menstruating, I felt embarrassed and ashamed to ask my mom about how my body was changing.

My mom survived the boarding school era, but it left painful experiences that damaged my mom for the rest of her life. My dad grew up in a very strict household, where children were "seen but not heard". Looking back, I realized that my parent's upbringing and life experiences affected their parenting skills and how we were raised. As I grew older and had children of my own, I eventually recognized that I was repeating the same parenting behavior that I had learned from my parents. I didn't want to talk to my kids about sex. I still felt embarrassed and ashamed about the subject.

I've been fortunate to attend many Native American "wellness" conferences and gatherings, and acquired additional education on a variety of subjects to further my education. Over the years, I have grown to understand the intergenerational trauma our ancestors endured and how it affects our lives today. Traditional belief is based on respect; western society is "shame-based" and unfortunately we have taken on those qualities.

One day after attending a "Native American Wellness Conference", I heard a national Indian speaker talk about the importance of talking to our children about sex and their bodies. "We will not be ashamed anymore" was her message. When I came home from the conference, I decided to overcome my fear about discussing sex with my teenage son. At first, it was extremely difficult and awkward, but I remained focused on the importance of being there for my son. Teenage years are stressful enough without the peer pressure of sex. Sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies plague the teenage population. In the beginning of our conversation, my son stated that he knew everything he needed to know about sex and by the tone of his voice I could tell that he felt uncomfortable about the subject. Over the years, my son and I have had many talks about life in general. As a result, that made it easier to sit and chat with him about sex and how his body has changed. Our topic was on masturbation and how it was natural for a young man to get sexual feelings, "wet" dreams, and erections. I know both of our faces were red with embarrassment, but I continued on because I wanted to give my son good information; not for him to rely on the information he had learned from the street.

My son talked about the kids he knew from school, some of them used drugs, some got pregnant early, and most of the kids were dating and have sexual relationships. To him, it was the norm to have sex before you graduate. As I listened, I helped him realize that having sex is natural and masturbation is natural. Masturbation can help him relieve some the tension and can be used as a form of birth control, instead of jumping into a sexual relationship too early. My most important goal in this life is to teach my children self-discipline and respect for themselves and for other people. It is very hard living in a world that teaches impulsiveness and self-indulgent behavior. At the end of our conversation, we both laughed and realized that our discussion strengthened our relationship.