

# moving beyond the “don’ts” of sex

It’s spring, and you can literally see hormones coming out of hibernation, bringing supercharged dynamics to your youth group. Whether it’s hand-holding, pushing, or teasing, kids are trying to get closer to one another. An adult volunteer in our ministry used to call himself the Couple Buster. He had the “gift” of keeping young people from getting too close. But is couple-busting the best we can do?

While teenagers live in fear that they won’t have sex before the world ends, youth ministers are trying to navigate the perfect storm of hormones with Bible verses, threats of STDs, and Jesus’ ever-watching eye. Our messages are predictable: Don’t have sex, don’t screw up, don’t get hurt, don’t, don’t, don’t.

But I “don’t” think it’s helping. Telling a teenager not to have sex is as helpful as saying, “Don’t think about the color green” (how are you doing?). The thought remains, making the mysterious even more alluring.

As adolescents are drawn by a seemingly irresistible force, we can:

- **Help parents get beyond “the talk.”** Instead of putting all the emphasis on parents sharing facts about sexuality, which can be overwhelming or insufficient, encourage them to have conversations about love, relationships, feelings, fears, and sexual expression. Offer resources, do role-plays (seriously), and inspire parents to let sexuality
- **Identify sex within identity.** All of us, male and female, are made in God’s image; thus, we have a sexual identity. Addressing sex apart from identity is to hyper-focus on the act rather than on the person. That’s why the “don’t have sex” and “how far is too far?” messages are irrelevant. Embedding sexuality within identity allows us to speak clearly against the disembodiment of sexual activity while celebrating every adolescent’s need for connection. Then friendship is about true community. Dating is about honor. Love is about self-sacrifice. Sex is about lifelong covenant.
- **Your turn.** Most of my graduate students say their parents didn’t talk with them about sex. People usually avoid discussing sexuality because it hasn’t been modeled to them, they fear the subject, they regret their own past, or they’re working through their sexual identity. Find appropriate outlets to work through these issues individually and, where it applies, in your relationship. Then, when you’re discussing sexuality with teenagers, go beyond the “don’ts” and remember to guide them as they navigate their sexuality—especially now that love is in the air. ■