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What Do I Tell My Children After The Evening News?

Glen Jenson

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A weekly question/answer column

What Do I Tell My Children After The Evening News?

Glen Jenson answers:*

The media often provides parents with excellent opportunities for discussion regarding family values and human sexuality. With the allegations of extramarital sexual behavior on the part of the U.S. President and the dialog between the experts as to what is proper, improper, truthful, lies, private, public or none of our business, many of us feel confused. But when children and youth get this information, they have an even more difficult time processing and understanding the things they see and hear. These types of issues, however, can provide a great opportunity for families to discuss moral and ethical matters and to include family values. Though the discussion may be more frank than some parents feel comfortable in bringing before the family, it is important that parents talk to their children and youth and answer questions to help clear up possible confusion. Consider these discussion ideas.

- The discussion will likely be easier if both parents are present. If that's not possible, one can do it just as well. Be sure to start the discussion when you have time to spend listening. Tailor the discussion to the age of the children or youth. By age 10, most children have a pretty good knowledge of the fundamentals of sexuality. Make the discussion time as relaxed and non-threatening as possible by not lecturing. Try to make it a time of listening, learning from each other, and providing clarification.
- Good openers might include any of the following questions. How do you feel about what is being alleged against the President? What if people are accused of things they didn't do? What impact does it have on the individual? What does our constitution say about "innocent until proven guilty?" What does our religion teach about morality? What is honesty? As we discuss what a person in the public light is doing, equally important is asking, what is appropriate behavior on the part of anyone pertaining to human sexuality? When is engaging in sexual activity universally wrong, i.e., rape, date rape, incest, prior to marriage, outside of marriage? What problems often come from engaging in sexual activity at the wrong time? What might be the result and consequences of sexual infidelity during marriage?
- The discussion should be short and should not turn into arguments about guilty or not guilty. This and subsequent discussions should focus not just on what prominent figures are doing or not doing, but rather on the meaning of sexuality within your family's values, what choices bring people the most happiness and why, along with how to make good choices. If bad choices have been made by family members, it might be good to discuss what the consequences have been and how future problems can be avoided. Spend time trying to learn and share with each other. Hopefully future family discussions can be held as the issues change and children or youth have further questions. Discussions regarding

human sexuality should be ongoing and not something parents do once and consider taken care of.

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* Glen O. Jenson is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist