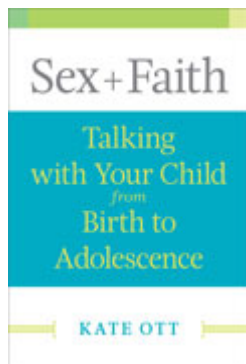


## Author helps make 'the talk 'a continuing conversation

Heidi Schlumpf | Apr. 30, 2014



SEX + FAITH: TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD FROM BIRTH TO ADOLESCENCE

By Kate Ott

Published by Westminster John Knox Press, \$17

Almost everything I know about parenting I learned from my sister. She and her husband are not the perfect parents (who is?), but their three happy, healthy teen and young adult children are living evidence of their parenting success.

My sister has read a number of parenting books that have informed her beliefs and practices. Although she hasn't read *Sex + Faith: Talking with Your Child from Birth to Adolescence*, the advice from author Kate Ott is pretty much what my sister has been doing all these years.

Talk to your children openly and honestly, using appropriate terms, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Start when they're very young. Teach that our bodies are good and God-given. Send a positive message about sexuality, not just a list of "thou shalt nots." Most importantly, connect conversations about sexuality with conversations about faith.

Easier said than done.

Many parents get performance anxiety when it comes to having to "the talk" with their children. First, Ott counsels, it shouldn't just be one talk, but rather a continuing, developmentally appropriate conversation throughout children's lives. To that end, her book is organized into four stages: birth to kindergarten, elementary school years, middle school years and high school years.

Additionally, sexuality education should happen in community, she says. Although parents are the first and primary educators of their children, values about faith and sexuality can be taught, shared and modeled by other adults in their lives.

For many progressive Christians, the notion of faith-based sexuality education -- fairly or unfairly -- conjures up images of sermons against homosexuality, masturbation and contraception, or abstinence-based chastity

programs, complete with young girls wearing promise rings representing vows they've made to their fathers to wait until marriage. Even the theology of the body, popularized by Pope John Paul II, was rife with complementarity teaching that heavily emphasizes gender-based roles.

There is none of that in *Sex + Faith*. Instead, Ott clearly sees lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as made in God's image; believes even middle school children should receive age-appropriate education about contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted disease; and points out that masturbation may reduce the likelihood of engaging in forms of intercourse. The book also makes no judgment about children conceived through assisted reproductive technologies and advocates strongly for gender equality.

Ott, a cradle Catholic who has served as a children's and youth minister and Sunday school teacher, is currently assistant professor of Christian ethics at Drew University's Theological School. \* She writes for an ecumenical audience, so while this is not a "Catholic" book per se, I think progressive Catholics will find it more helpful than some Catholic books. In her brief introductory chapter on "The Faith Connection," Ott boils down the "core Christian beliefs" to three: God is love; Jesus was divine; and Scripture teaches about God and how to live.

*Sex + Faith* is clearly written, though I would have appreciated a few more stories or examples from Ott's own life. The book also has helpful "teachable messages and moments" summaries at the end of each chapter, a resources list at the end of the book, and "question boxes" throughout with suggested answers to kids' tough questions.

This, I believe, is the book's greatest strength. To have a handy script when your son asks about erectile dysfunction ("You already know penises can become hard and erect. For some men this stops happening and they may take medicine if they want to have sexual intercourse or make a baby. I don't think we need to see commercials about it during every sports game ?") is worth the price of the book.

When my husband and I were preparing to adopt our children, we were taught that we should start talking with our children about adoption when they were infants. Even if they could not understand, at least we would get used to hearing ourselves tell the story. Although I had already absorbed much of the gist of Ott's book from my sister, *Sex + Faith* provides the words I'll need -- sometimes the exact words -- when our own 5- and 6-year-olds' questions get tougher. I know I'll be returning to those later chapters as our children grow older.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the parent of two children and the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA).]

*\*The original version of this story incorrectly stated that Kate Ott converted to the United Methodist Church.*

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