

# Parenting Beyond Belief:

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## *Parenting and the Safest Sex of All*

*COLUMN by DALE MCGOWAN, Ph.D. For [HumanistNetworkNews.org](http://HumanistNetworkNews.org)  
(HNN's Parenting Beyond Belief column provides a forum for humanist parents and parenting experts to share their wisdom, advice and knowledge of parenting and family issues. Edited, and occasionally written by Dale McGowan, the monthly column features guest writers who provide information and support about issues affecting freethought parents and children in the 21st century.)*



*We have reason to believe that man first walked upright to free his hands for masturbation.*

— Lily Tomlin

Joycelyn Elders, the most quotable U.S. Surgeon General of all time, once said, "Condoms will break, but I can assure you that vows of abstinence will break more easily."

That kind of quotability can get a political appointee fired. At a UN conference on AIDS in 1994, Elders was asked whether it would be appropriate to promote masturbation to prevent young people from engaging in riskier forms of sexual activity. "I think that it is part of human sexuality," she replied, "and perhaps it should be taught."

Never mind that the answer was sensible. Never mind that it was true. Once U.S. conservatives pictured their progeny receiving instruction in self-gratification—complete with cucumber-based demos, no doubt—Elders' dismissal was assured.

Sense and truth have never had much place in our cultural discourse on sex, and few aspects of the topic have been more twitchingly mismanaged than masturbation. Those who recall the baffling mix of intense pleasure and intense shame that accompanies most discoveries of masturbation should want nothing more than to spare our own kids the unnecessary torment. Yet masturbation, the very first form of sex kids will generally encounter, is the topic most often missing from parent-child discussions of sex.

The roots of our dysfunctional attitudes toward masturbation are intertwined with the age-old distrust of bodily pleasures. That distrust probably didn't *originate* in religion. Among other things, religion is simply a place to put our most beloved bad ideas for safekeeping. But when it comes to perpetuating and reinforcing dysfunctional attitudes toward the safest sex of all, it's hard to beat the Abrahamic religions for over-the-top hysteria.

The Catholic catechism calls masturbation "an intrinsically and gravely disordered action." Rabbi Shlomo

Ganzfried, a popular 19th century Jewish theologian, called it "a graver sin than any other in the Torah." Mormonism teaches that "masturbation is a sinful habit that robs one of the Spirit," while Shi'a Islam forbids it completely, quoting sect founder Imam Ali as saying, "one who masturbates commits a sin equal to killing me eighty times." *¡Ay caramba!*

But at least one influential religious conservative has voiced support for a more accepting, naturalistic parenting approach to masturbation—and has been excoriated for it by his fellows. The following passage refers to a conversation he had as a boy with his minister father:

"We were riding in the car, and my dad said, 'Jim, when I was a boy, I worried so much about masturbation. It really became a scary thing for me because I thought God was condemning me for what I couldn't help. So I'm telling you now that I hope you don't feel the need to engage in this act when you reach the teen years, but if you do, you shouldn't be too concerned about it. I don't believe it has much to do with your relationship with God.' What a compassionate thing my father did for me that night in the car."

Aside from "I hope you don't feel the need," and the bit about God, this is almost precisely the message I want to get across to my own kids. And it comes from none other than [James Dobson](#) of Focus on Family.

He still tangles it with silliness, suggesting that boys in the act think not of any girls they know but only of their "eventual wives." Christian author Herbert J. Miles goes one better, suggesting that boys pray first, thanking God for the gift of sexuality, then think only of *him* during orgasm (which certainly gives "Oh, God!" a whole new meaning). But let's give credit to both of them for getting the basic message right and thereby reducing the number of children growing up with unnecessary self-loathing and sexual repression.

In the absence of communication on the issue, children are guaranteed to feel tremendous shame and guilt when the natural developments of early adolescence lead them to self-stimulation. When your child is on the cusp of puberty, casually let him or her know:

- What masturbation is;
- That it's a normal thing nearly everyone does at some point;
- That it's a natural indication that the body is becoming ready for sexual activity and reproduction;
- That all of the stories about grave consequences are complete nonsense;
- That though it is not shameful, it should be done only in private.

Removing the guilt and shame from our children's first encounters with their sexuality requires no detailed description or instruction—just simple permission. And nonreligious parents, free of repressive

doctrines, are in an ideal position to give their children that permission, as well as the mental, emotional, and sexual health that comes with it.

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*Editor's Note:* For more information on humanist parenting, click the "Parenting" tab in the left-hand sidebar that appears on every page of the Institute for Humanist Studies website, or visit:

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