

It's Just Sex

How the fuck do you talk to teenage sons about their bodies and dating and girls and sex without coming off like Dr. Ruth, or the more up-to-date, Laci Green. Green is Youtubes sexy squealer-she who causes ear bleeds in her badass videos talking sex, all kinds of sex, straight-up-no bullshit. Check out her video on anal or butt sex, she uses both terms, to see what I mean. Note-to-reader, it isn't likely that I will be mistaken for Laci-I am probably older than her mother.

I am not a prying Jewish mother of stereotype, something out of a Woody Allen film. I'm not "a patron saint of self-sacrifice," as Sophie Portnoy, from Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint describes herself. I'm not the mom trying to be hipper than I am not. I just want to make sure that my sons keep themselves safe. I want them to know their responsibilities. I want them to know that sex is not just about getting laid.

Based on the boys ages and sex, now 13 and 17, but back when this started 7 and 11, I thought that this should be my husband's domain, but Steve is far more reserved than I am. It is just sex. I repeat over-and-over again. We teach them how to navigate their emotions, to chose the mitzvah-the right action (when they could sit on their asses), to be caring, to do laundry, to cook, to clean. Honestly, I knew that I'd have to lead this. Six years ago, in the fall of 2010, I signed up my 52 year-old husband and my 11 year-old son Daniel for a father-and-son sex-education class at Childrens Hospital in north Seattle. Our younger son William, four years younger, would get a preview of what he'd get to do later. All our friends with kids the same age-single or married, moms or dads, gay or straight- were signing up (or being

signed-up) for the class. We Seattleites-hip, open, tech savvy, often progressive, not typically religious, and groovy-happily outsource sex talks for our children.

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I came of age in the late seventies and early eighties, after the sexual-revolution, in an era when abortion was legal and accessible, before HIV/AIDS came with murderous intent, when a new safer birth-control pill was a Planned Parenthood away. I was born in a small window, in a family, in a city where sex was a frontier to be explored without shame and the devastating consequences that previous generations had to bear. Young women, like me, could discover our sexual selves with appetite in relative safety. Herpes was not desirable, but it was not deadly. And, being sexually active did not earn you a slut stamp.

My kids will never know the freedom that I experienced. I have reminders stashed away that I can't bear to toss- a stack of miscellaneous pictures of me with friends skinny dipping at Tassajara, a Zen retreat center in northern California-home of the Tassajara bread book. I still have my journal from the time that I camped on a beach in the Sinai Desert the year after high school. Never mind that I was in an Orthodox Jewish seminary in Jerusalem then. A lot of my friends from school hitched rides down south to the Sinai Peninsula (then, under Israeli control, now restored to Egypt)- Nueba, Dahab, or Sharm el-Sheikh.

In my early twenties, after a brief Orthodox marriage, I continued my exploration with men I knew from school or work in the name of casual, or, maybe, a better term is friendly, sex. I studied sex with lovers who were sometimes friends and not quite boyfriends in the dark and light while stoned and while straight, indoors and

outdoors. I think of it as an independent study in sex. Good sex does not come without good technique, practice, and an open heart. I was not a drinker. I've not had a drunken night ever and have never woke in despair wondering who was next to me or where I was.

I want much the same for my kids, but times are different.

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A week or so before the class at Childrens Hospital, Steve leaned against the leaded glass window in our bedroom while I stretched out on our white queen-size bed. "You two have talked about everything already," he said, trying to get out of taking Daniel to the class. His arms were extended behind him, his palms resting on the windowsill.

Instead of answering, I looked at the dark-rimmed rectangular glasses framing his beautiful green eyes, his salt and pepper hair, the muscles on his forearms, and at the black t-shirt hugging his long torso. Nice, I thought.

"Come on," he tried again. "Daniel's getting sex education at school this year. That's enough sex for now."

I didn't answer. I just kept looking him over, thinking that if we didn't have two kids downstairs, who were likely to barge into the bedroom at any moment, we'd have sex.

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At twelve, I discovered a purple-brown stain on my jockey underwear. I was at a friend's house; she was a year younger than I was, and had already started her period.

I didn't want her to know that this was my first period. I searched under the bathroom sink for a stash of pads but found none.

I wadded up toilet paper, placed it between my legs on my blue jockey briefs, and ran home- six-blocks uphill- afraid of gushing onto my jeans. (Years earlier, I had sat on a white couch with a ballpoint pen in my back pocket; I am still shamed by the memory of the sticky-blue stain I left behind.)

I climbed our concrete steps two at a time and crashed into the house. "I started my period," I yelled to my mother and darted into the bathroom. I sat on the toilet with my underwear around my thighs and stared at the dark stain that was exactly the same size as when I first discovered it.

There was no congratulation, no now you're a woman, nothing. My forty-three year-old mother, tired after a long day at work, yelled back at me, "I'll call dad to pick up some Kotex and a belt." I wonder what she was thinking. She was probably making dinner after working all day. She'd been through it three times before. If I remember correctly she used the same tone as if she were saying, "I've asked dad to pick-up milk on the way home."

When my dad arrived home an hour later, I was slightly embarrassed as he handed me the white and blue A&H bag from the store where he worked as a pharmacist. No words were exchanged. I locked myself in the bathroom and pulled out the pads and the flimsy white elastic belt circa 1973. I threaded the pad wings through the gauzy belt and slipped it on. Neither of my parents mentioned my period again.

A year later, my father brought home self-adhesive pads, and I threw the stained belt away. Later, I found my sisters' tampons and gave up on pads altogether.

There was never a talk.

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By the day of the sex-ed class at Childrens Hospital, Steve had stopped asking me to go, and he and Daniel were ready. They left home after an early dinner, and by the time they returned home a few hours later, I could tell that something was different.

"How was it?" I asked

"Great!" Daniel said.

"Actually it was pretty good," Steve agreed. "Well, except for the penis opera. They divided us into two groups and passed out song sheets. The boys sang the high parts, and dad's sang the low parts."

"You loved that," I said ironically. Neither Steve nor I like games.

"Mom, can I show you the handouts?" Daniel asked, eager to share them with me.

"Sure. Go upstairs and get ready for bed, and I'll be up in a few."

With Daniel upstairs, I gave Steve a single thumb-up. "You survived?"

"It really wasn't a big deal," he said. I refrained from reminding him how many times he had tried to get out of going.

I went up to tuck Daniel into bed and found him on top of the covers, going over the handouts. He was reviewing the book list. "Can we get one of these tomorrow?" He looked serious as he pointed to a few of the titles. I loved his curiosity and lack of embarrassment. He was my kid.

I saw *Our Bodies Our Selves* on the list and got excited. OBOS, as we abbreviated it in college, was a sacred text in the Women's Studies department in the early eighties. It was a book about women's health and sexuality written by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective first published in 1971. (The group later was renamed *Our Bodies Ourselves*.) The book came from a group of 12 women, ages 23-39, who met at a women's liberation conference at Emanuel College in Boston in 1969. Two years later, their book was out. It was about women's health, gender, sex, sexual orientation, and sexual pleasure for women. One year later in 1971 came the *The Joy of Sex*. The sexual revolution was underway.

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When Daniel was young, unlike his younger brother who never has asked any questions, he loved to hear his birth story. I told him the story over-and-over-and-over again starting early on his birthday leading up to his scheduled c-section . We took Ajax to the vet and found out he had fleas. We bathed him. Then, we drove to the hospital for the surgery. The doctor made a cut in my belly and pulled you out. Friends and family came pouring into the room, and we had a welcome party before the nurses kicked everyone out...

As Daniel got older, he became more curious. Did I really come out of your stomach? How did I get in there? Does a man really put his penis into a woman's vagina? Did you do that? How come I didn't come out of your vagina like everyone else? I laughed at the thought of everyone else coming out of my vagina but didn't bother to correct him. I knew what he meant.

I gave straight answers that were likely way too long and detailed.

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When I was thirteen, at a Jewish youth-group retreat, I was smuggled into my fourteen-year-old boyfriend's cabin on Friday night. We got inside his sleeping bag and were making out. It was the first time that I had ever touched a penis. I remember the strange warm rubbery feel. We heard heavy footsteps and then the door was thrown open. "Who's in here?" A male voice yelled in our direction. I pulled down my shirt and tugged my pants up. I hid under the flap of the sleeping bag, inhaling the warm, musky scent of our bodies. The counselor aimed a flashlight at the bunk, blinding us. "Come on out." We untangled and struggled to get out of the sleeping bag. I was sent back to my cabin with one of the girls' counselors who had come in during the bust. We were scolded but our counselors who were probably five years older than we were would be doing the similar things soon. This memory impelled me to sign Daniel up for the class at Childrens Hospital.

I still wonder what would have happened had the counselors not stormed the cabin. Would my boyfriend have stopped? Would I have asked him to? If we'd had sex, would he have used a condom? What if I had gotten pregnant? What would my life be like now if I had had a child then? What would my life be like if I had had an abortion?

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When Daniel was thirteen, he went to a dance at school. Before the dance, a strict set of rules were sent out, and kids who were attending had to sign a contract-no drugs, no alcohol, no coming back in if you leave, no inappropriate dancing. I think

Daniel wore a shirt with a tie and nice jeans. He was well put together when he left, and he was ecstatic when he came home.

When I tucked him in bed that night, he told me about dancing with a girl named Anna. He talked about how he felt himself change in the moment that he held her and moved on the dance floor. I was pleased that he was a romantic. Whatever he may have thought about girls before had shifted, tumblers to his emotions clicked into place. Was it the feel of her body against his, her hair on his arm, her hands on his back, or his hand on her waist?

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At sixteen, I went to Planned Parenthood on my own before I had intercourse for the first time. It would be a stretch to say that I was a virgin at that point, but I held onto that fig leaf, I had not had intercourse but had done almost everything else.

I had a primer on sex by watching my three older sisters on the couch in our den. They are seven, nine, and ten years older than I am, and it was the mid-nineteen sixties. By the time I was six, I had seen and heard a lot. I had walked in on everything at least once. I loved my sisters' paisley dresses, white-embroidered peasant blouses, short skirts, hot pants, flowing skirts, and halter tops. I took it all in.

I watched my sister Dee with her boyfriend on a celery color brocade couch watching Speed Racer after school. They would lean into each other, eyes closed with lips pressed together like pink slugs. I watched where they put their hands while kissing. I watched my sister's boyfriend pull her into embraces that I'd now term foreplay.

At age 16, I messed around with a 26 year-old-man, who was a leader of the religious youth group that I was part of. My sister Esther, nine years older than I was, found out and came down on me for fooling around with an older man. “He’s taking advantage of you. He’s an adult. It’s illegal.” Now I realize how creepy this was. I see him on Facebook every once in awhile, and I wonder how many other young women he seduced.

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One afternoon, three years after Daniel had the sex ed class at Childrens Hospital, I snagged him as he bounced through the kitchen like a kangaroo looking for something to eat. I sliced an apple and put it on a small plate with roasted almonds and a chunk of dark chocolate. As I prepared the snack, I made a mental list of the things I wanted to communicate.

I may have chosen that day because Daniel was now five-feet-ten inches, his voice had (seemingly) dropped an octave overnight, his feet were bigger than his father’s feet, and his legs were covered with fine-dark hair. Or maybe it was because he was always fighting me for the full-length mirror in our room.

“Sit down, Bubu. I want to tell you a few things.” I pointed to the stool across the counter. “There is no reason for accidental pregnancies in our house,” I began.

“What? Daniel shot off of his stool. “What are you talking about?”

“This is the talk!”

“Oh, no way! You’re kidding me.” He slammed his hand down on the counter.

“I’m not kidding.” I slammed my own hand down in response.

“Why? This is just awful. Dad!” He yelled in the direction of the den, then turned to me again, “You already made dad and me go to the class in fifth grade.”

“That was three years ago. Consider this a review. ”

I had his attention. I kept going. “Both participants are responsible for contraception. Unprotected intercourse-even once-can lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections: herpes, AIDS, syphilis, scabies, crabs, tricho...whatever, gonorrhea, chlamydia, genital warts, and tricho... Got it?” I had stumbled on trichomoniasis. I had volunteered at Planned Parenthood as a contraception counselor in the mid 1980’s. We had to learn how to pronounce every sexually transmitted disease known at the time, squeeze a diaphragm into a taco shape, talk about the difference between a cervical cap and a diaphragm, and slip a condom over two straight fingers. I would go over the young woman’s income, and write down her choice of birth control before she went for an exam. I had this stuff down, but Daniel didn’t know my past.

He looked at me in dismay, “Are we really having this conversation?”

“Yes, we are,” I said, my heart beat quickening.

“I cannot believe this.” He grabbed his head in both hands and ducked down with a huge, ear-spreading grin of embarrassment and rested his head on the counter.

I kept going. “Condoms are your friends. When you start dating someone that you really like, I want you to have one with you at all times. Know how to use it. You can ask Dad for help or just practice. And, NO, this is not permission to have sex now.”

He looked up from his head-down position. "Are we done yet?"

"Not quite. I'll let you know when we are done."

"What else?"

"No means NO! No questions asked. No exception to this rule. Put yourself together and walk away. You'll survive. No one dies because of a neglected erection. There's no shame in getting dressed and leaving. There's shame in forcing someone to do something that they don't want to. You may misread signals in the beginning. Assume that if you do not hear yes, the answer is NO." Any kind of sex, requires affirmative consent.

I wanted to explain to him the loaded world of sexuality for girls, which is different than it is for boys, even today. I wanted to tell him about the contradictions for girls. Girls who have sex and are found out can be targets of slut shaming, a way of making girls pay for their sexual activity. There's no equivalent for boys. I'd wait for this part for another day. I reluctantly let him go.

"If you want to be done, I need you to give me a summary of what I just said."

"There are no accidental pregnancies, condoms are my friend, I can talk to you or Dad, no means no, and you are not giving me permission to have sex."

"Good enough for now. We'll revisit this later."

Daniel ran to the den. "Dad do you know what mom just did?" I heard him say.

"I can only guess," Steve answered, unaware that I had chosen this moment to deliver an impromptu sex talk. Steve, of course is free to do so too, but he is still

waiting to have the talk with his dad, who is still waiting to have the talk with his dad.

I'm not sure why I did it at that exact moment. I wanted to give Daniel The Talk before he was too old to listen to me.

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When Daniel was twelve, I was at a writing workshop with Ruth Ozeki at Hedgebrook on Whidbey Island. There were six women, none of whom I knew before the workshop. I told them about Daniel's upcoming Bar Mitzvah. Our event was a handmade labor of love. We screen printed the invitations, made Turkish pastries and baked strudel. A friend had painted a ten foot banner to cover the cross in the church, and another friend had been Daniel's teacher through two years of demanding study.

Joelle, one of the women on the retreat, told me of a tradition in Los Angeles. Supposedly-a custom of girls giving blowjobs to boys as a bar mitzvah gift. Was the boy blown by one girl or many? Was it before the service or during the party? Was it in a bathroom stall? Did the boys perform the same service for girls at their bat mitzvahs? I was not sure it was true, but I could not totally rule it out. In the eighties, New York and Los Angeles had turned the coming of age ritual into a full-on carnival of great expense.

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I had unprotected sex once, at nineteen. Two weeks later I was throwing up my Cheerios, morning after morning. I went to Planned Parenthood, before there were home pregnancy kits. I had an abortion, also at Planned Parenthood. My boyfriend

took me. It was 1980; the procedure was clean, safe, and quick. I was shaken, but I got through it. I want to teach my sons to share the responsibility for birth control and any unintended pregnancies. My second abortion was the outcome of an I.U.D. failure. I haven't told Daniel (or William) about my abortions, but I will. I want him to know that I am not perfect. I want them to understand that Roe v. Wade, the 1973 historic Supreme Court decision guaranteeing a woman's right to safe abortion saved me twice from having children that I would not have been able to properly care for. I want them to understand that Roe is constantly under attack and that all children should be wanted. There should be no such thing as a mistake child.

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Daniel is now seventeen and measures in at six-two. He is driving. I took him out on his first drives before he was fifteen and had a permit. I believe in doing things before my kids start hocking me-when it is a surprise for good behavior-not the result of nagging. I had him drive up and down rows of empty parking lots. He was heavy on the breaks and had a big smile that covered half his face. I launch us forward, and Steve comes in to ease us through the transition. It's the way we do business in our house.

I am having the talks with the kids that my parents didn't have with me. When William was eleven, Steve took him to the 'sex class' as we call it, without protest. William had no interest in discussing anything with me after the class was over. Daniel asks all of the time, "Why hasn't William gotten any of the talks yet?" William makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with any talk with me about sex.

My nephew had a baby with his girlfriend before considering marriage. Both he and his girlfriend have divorced parents. Their daughter was a planned baby. On the one hand I get it, there's no reason that they should bet on marriage working. But, on the other hand, kids are hard on a relationship, so why not get married, so the door to leave is a little more difficult to open. They are now married. My nephew would like another child soon. His wife wisely is putting him off.

I suggest to both of our boys that they make serious commitments before children. Finish school. Find work you love. Find out who you are. Find a partner you love and want to have children with.

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I want to make sure our sons know that they can talk to us about anything. Now, we all joke about the talk, and sex is a family word. William is in seventh grade. If I just say the words, the talk, he is gone. "I'm fine." He says. "No your not, I'll tell you when you are fine." I respond.

Standing in line at the grocery store, I will turn to Daniel and say in a soft voice, "Would you like a pack of condoms." He wryly answers, "I think a girlfriend should come first." I look at him and can't help but think how cute he is. His best friend has a girlfriend, and I know it is hard on him, but I'm proud of him for waiting for the right person and not making the wrong person into the right person. He's smart in that way. William, I have learned, has had girlfriends since fourth grade. His friends' mothers tell me that William is a ladies man. I can see it. But, he too has not done the girl-friend thing. He went to his first dance this year. He played it cool, and he is cool. Neither of the boys seem interested in proving anything to anyone.

I fear parties and groups of teens. I fear the social process of Thresholds that Mark Granovetter, a Stanford sociologist proposed four decades ago, which Malcolm Gladwell has used to talk about school violence in a recent New Yorker article. Thresholds refer to the number of people who must do something first before a particular individual is willing to join in something that s/he would not normally engage in. A person with a threshold of zero needs no one to go first. A person with a threshold of five or six requires a fair number of people to step in before he will forego his own moral code. I believe that my kids have high thresholds, but I want to make sure that they are prepared. They have Uber on their phones for quick getaways, they have cameras on their phones, they are told not to hesitate to call the cops, Steve, me, or our oldest niece. They are told not to leave their friends in vulnerable situations.

Basically, I want them to know that when they have girlfriends, and they are ready to have sex, and they have received an audible Yes -to find an appropriate place. I don't want them getting laid at a party after midnight where drunk kids are pairing-off, seeking places to squat for what can only be bad sex. Yet, I don't want to walk in on them. I don't want to hear anything. I don't want to find them in our bed. I don't want to wash their sheets. I want my boys to be clear that sex is not a game, girls are not toys, and that people can be hurt or broken beyond repair. If they are old enough to have sex, they are old enough to be responsible.

The end