



Community Book Discussion
Your Daughter's Bedroom: Insights for Raising Confident Women
by Joyce McFadden, MSW
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Carrie Kirkpatrick intro

The mission of Raising Girls is to inspire thought & dialogue to help girls thrive.

This project is about the conversation that you carry out of here, that you take home and have with your spouse, with your girls, with your friends. For me it is the motivation to be the mother I want to be.

In having a mission and being a small organization, we are grateful to Mickey Babcock and the Equipoise Fund. Today is 10th anniversary and we want to recognize them for that. Thanks, too, to all who gave to us during OBFR! We're a tiny organization that puts on a couple of programs each year and we're glad to hear you think it is worthwhile.

This book is juicy and detailed and intimate. It will be a "thing" to talk about masturbation with a group when I haven't talked about that with my closest friends! Thanks to Annie Riddell for teasing out some of the important points. I'm going to start with a recap of the book. Then Ponteir is going to lead us in a discussion for the second half of the evening. At the end, we'll come back together to talk about and review salient points.

The book is Your Daughter's Bedroom by Joyce McFadden, MSW.

McFadden wanted to talk to women about the things that were most important to them, the topics that affected them. She talked with them about myriad topics, from depression to c-sections to childhood. The stories and themes are interwoven and intertwined within the book. Three topics rose to the surface and seemed to affect every woman:

- Mother-daughter relationship
- Menstruation
- Masturbation

Starting with the mother-daughter relationship: What are we not talking about with our daughters? Much like the things that we do say, omission sends a message, too. She realizes that there is a reason: do we really want to talk about sex? Do we want to know about our mother's sex lives? We send messages through silent omission. But our daughters need a model of intimacy. They need honest communication, they have an entitlement to erotic life—as we do, they need to have the ability to weigh consequences and choices. If they find us not reliable to tell them about the whole picture of a woman's experience then they think that we don't know where we stand. Later they don't know where they stand.

We spend time in the land of hope, telling them how great they can be. We help them be their best selves except about sex. In large part, this is because we, as mothers, have a great concern about the over-sexualized version of themselves so they hear a lot about the dangers and not about the lusciousness of sexuality and intimacy. As a result, our daughters end up in unhealthy haze wondering why they are seeing so much sexualized behavior but hearing only about dangers. If we don't talk to them, then they have no one to help them to make sense of this. Yet no one has prepared moms to be healthy sexual role models to their daughters.

The beginning of the sexual discussion was framed by Freud—with virtually no mention of a view of sex from the point of view of women. A study in 1977 showed that girls were more likely to know the word "penis" than a word for their own genitals. In addition, mothers are seen as sexually invisible in the house. In large part, we do that for propriety's sake; we as mothers participate in that. We need to have them see us as sexual.

So much of what they see of women are examples of women being over-sexualized. McFadden feels it is important for girls to see that a mother has a role of a sexual being as well. That information might help give a daughter grounding in terms of the oversexed things she sees, especially since mothers are not usually seen as creatures of desire. We also need to talk about desire: what desire feels like in your body and what it seems like in their head.

"Has anyone talked to their daughter about desire?" [Silence.]

"I like to think of myself as ahead of the game on a lot of issues, but I'm not ahead of the game on this."

Girls want to talk about their bodies. In this book, McFadden doesn't talk about oxytocin, the "tend and befriend hormone" that women secrete. In How Girls Thrive by JoAnn Deak, Deak talks about the power of this difference. Our girls need this information: that we want to tend and befriend in a way that is different than men. We need to strike a balance between closeness and independence they need. This is how girls thrive: Connectedness, Confidence, Competence.

The red zone for girls, the time when sexually transmitted diseases, rape, unintended pregnancy are most prevalent is between ages 15-30. If we better prepare daughters about these issues, we might affect that prevalence. This is not one big conversation, this is a thousand mini conversations, this is a constant talk.

You could talk too long, say embarrassing things, or be awkward. This is fine. What McFadden finds is that our efforts are worthwhile even if we get it wrong and are stumbling through the conversations. Having the conversations is still better than omitting. Omission causes damage later. For girls who are high school ages: they have a lot of the information cognitively but haven't assimilated physically or emotionally. I thought about that 15-30 red zone and how it so often means that they are going out and having experiences they aren't prepared for. Part of our job is preparing them for that, preparing them to make choices, to have the information, to know it in a real way.

McFadden says that the word masturbation is the sexual equivalent of "Voldemort." Most mothers haven't talked with their daughters about this, they just don't know how. In McFadden's research, 25% said that they still wouldn't talk to daughters. 90% wanted to know what was going on with other women about this. Masturbation can be about self-soothing in young children, self-discovery and experimentation later on. As mothers, we might talk about the psychological and emotional functions of masturbation. Girl's lack of ownership over own sexuality leads to vulnerability. When we talk about it, it has the power of normalization, the power that gives and the bond that gives. We might point out that

later in life masturbation can be used as a tool to quell desire. What does desire feel like in the body? This is a way to learn about sex. No one teaching you about what you need as a woman, about what desire feels like or how to address it.

Body Image Culture permeates a lot of the way we talk. “You look fantastic.” “I love your haircut.” “Have you lost weight?” The women McFadden talked to wanted to be judged on intelligence and compassion not their looks. How much as mothers are we perpetuating judging on looks? How often do we allow people to tell our young daughters that they look pretty or cute rather than comment on what they are doing or how strong or smart they are? We need to think about how we would like it to be different for girls. If you could create something new for them, what would it be?

What is great about this book is that it reminds you: you are going to make mistakes, you are not going to do it perfectly, and that is ok. What you need to do is Do It! It gives you the confidence to start and continue the conversation when you realize the costs of not taking charge and talking about all of the things that go along with being a woman as a sexual being.

Ponteir Sackrey took over group discussion and explained:

We’ll have group discussions and then get back together to summarize what we’ve discussed. We invite you to sit in small groups; 2-3 chairs are arranged together to make it easier to discuss with someone near you. We’ll discuss questions around the three topics.

Housekeeping: Ponteir acts as timer, each discussion is nine minutes. Within that nine minutes the timer will chime three times to invite you to have a new person talk about the topic. After nine minutes, we’ll wrap up and have the discussion about the next question.

We’ll start with Menstruation.

1. The discussion will be about how we discuss menstruation with our daughters and introduce the topic of menstruation to them.

- What are your best intentions for talking with your daughter about this?
- If you don’t have a daughter or haven’t talked to your daughter about this yet, ask for suggestions, or talk about what you wish your mother had said.

2. The second area that Carrie brought out is the mother-daughter relationship. Our daughters emulate us—and also teach us about their emerging sexuality. We are teaching them whether we think we are or not. It’s just a matter of what we are teaching. Kids are like video cameras: they are watching us all the time.

- How can we as mothers role model a healthy sexual identity.
- If that didn’t happen with your mom, what could she have done?
- If it did, what did she do?

3. This topic is Masturbation. I don’t talk about this with my friends and a lot of you are my friends... So here we go.

“...we ignore the penalty incurred by hiding the realities of sexuality...” (slide)

Masturbation can be a self-soothing act for small children. For older girls, it can be a way that they learn about their own sexuality. It can be how we as women learn about what pleases us. It is a release. If you

read the book, it is amazing to hear how people talk about it: Some don't do it, some do it a lot, everyone has specific reasons for doing it or not doing it. Maybe this is a chance to get more comfortable before we talk to our girls about it. Or maybe you already have. Here is a chance to role play how you might talk about it.

- In your small group, role play what you might tell your daughter about masturbation.

We are going to open the floor for comments, conversation, questions. I notice that no one wants to stop talking and there is lots of laughing, no tears. I'm going to ask anyone who is brave enough to stand up and share something on any of the three topics: menstruation, mother-daughter relationship/healthy relationship, masturbation.

Comment: I would love to hear what anyone came up with as to how we can be good sexual role models as mothers. Any epiphany on that?

Comment: I think it's about being comfortable in own body, in being in relationships that are congruent with who you are. Being affectionate with kids and loved ones is an important step in that relationship. Assuming responsibility for being comfortable in own body is really the key. The benefit to my daughter is that I am coming from a place where there is no shame.

Comment: We were talking about the things that we assoc with healthy sexuality including physical indulgence and spontaneity. We talked about having experiential, tactile moments that aren't overtly sexual but still teach our daughters (and ourselves) to love and appreciate our bodies and not be afraid, be comfortable in our bodies. For example, a spontaneous trip to hot spring where you can talk about how great it makes your body feel. Finding comfort and confidence in your body and experiences that mimic that.

Comment: We feel affection for our significant other and we show affection in front of our kids, which is one thing, but how do I demonstrate healthy sexuality in the home—that's another thing. We're anxious to see each other, kissing hugging touching, but how do we show that there is a point where it is more than just affection, it is a healthy sexual relationship?

Comment: I saw on the slide the statistic that there has been a 400% increase in women over 40 with eating disorders. I've started to be really careful about what I say about my body. I hear from my daughters that their friends are pointing out their tummies, etc. and being concerned about being too big and so on. I try to contextualize my body in terms of health. I try to say that God made you just the way you are and you're perfect. I never say I'm fat or that kind of thing.

Comment: When our daughter was born, my husband said, "You are never allowed to say anything bad about your body ever again. Never say another bad thing about your body, she will absorb that and her self-esteem is too important." And I haven't. Seven years. Well—at least in front of her. [Laughter.]

Comment: One other topic that was prevalent in the book and which is alarming: 1 in 4 women are raped or have non-consensual sexual experience. This is alarming. You only hope that it doesn't happen to your daughter. I hope they don't have to experience this. Reading this book I realized: I need to have the conversation with my son about boundaries and date rape drugs, about if you know someone involved you have to turn them in. We need to teach our sons, our men.

Carrie: There is a book called, May I Kiss You? It is an excellent book for a son or a daughter with scenario after scenario of why it is good to ask before sexual activity takes place. Lots of examples of encounters

with real life outcomes and why it is always better to ask. We think that it is sexier to have things just happen and not acknowledge that it is happening but it is not.

You also touched on something else in my notes. In that red zone, the ages 15-30 when the rapes and unintended pregnancies and STDs are most prevalent, Peggy Orenstein comments that girls are totally disconnecting from their bodies. She uses the expression “selling it, not feeling it.” McFadden didn’t make this connection but we all need the richer, fuller, rounder context of being a women, we need more information because that leads to better choices. When we know what desire feels like, we can decide what to do about desire. “Selling it not feeling it” is part of the culture for girls today.

Carrie

Save the date: February 19 & 20

Leonard Sax, MD, Ph.D.

Why Gender Matters

More details soon