



“A Conversation for Fathers”
October 20, 2010
Teton County Library
Full Notes

Panel speakers: Dr. Stephen Lottridge (SL) and Dr. Doug George (DG)

Raising Girls founder Carrie Kirkpatrick (CK) introduced and welcomed.

Mickey Babcock (MB): Raising Girls is a program of The Equipoise Fund, a small charitable foundation. Our Mission is to energize, enrich and encourage the vision, voice and visibility of the women and girls of Wyoming. Our Vision is to see individuals and communities across Wyoming actively value and respect the roles of women and girls, and to see Wyoming women and girls continually elevating those roles in their communities. And our Purpose is to be a creative alternative to traditional funding for projects that enhance the vision, voice and visibility of Wyoming women.

CK introduced both speakers saying, they will each give opening remarks and their personal experiences raising their own girls. Then Q&A, informal conversation after that.

SL:

My notes are chaotic, which is the perfect introduction to raising adolescent girls (or boys).

Adolescence presents several developmental tasks. First, this is the stage of development in which the girl is first ably truly to put herself in another person's place. As a result, relationships and activities tend to become very intense. Girls at this age are likely to have intense friendships or dating relationships. In addition, this often gives rise to rebelliousness, or simply uncharacteristic behavior. As a father, you are likely to think, “Where did my girl go? This is somebody else. This is somebody else's identity.” And you are right. Except that it is natural and even healthy at this stage to try on different identities in order to discover who one truly is.

Second, at this stage girls (and boys) tend to want two different, mutually exclusive things simultaneously. On the one hand, they want to be seen as autonomous and independent, and at the same time they want to be able to regress and be little and be taken care of. This tends to lead to power struggles, because whichever side you take as a father, your daughter is likely to swing to the other side. This can be very difficult and disconcerting, but it is completely natural.

Third, at this stage girls (and boys) usually come into their sexual maturity and experience emotions and feelings that leave them confused and urgent at the same time. This can be frightening for a father, especially if he remembers his own adolescence and its urges. But this, too, is a natural stage and it is important for a father to appreciate his daughter's development and to help her appreciatively through the struggles to womanhood. Fathers often want to leave this part of child rearing to the mother, but the father is very important at this time. While it is important not to be physically seductive or inappropriate

with your daughter at this time, it is also very important to continue to be affectionate and appreciative, in appropriate ways, of your daughter's maturation and growing womanhood.

Perhaps the most important and difficult task at this stage is to maintain firm but flexible boundaries for behavior, with clear expectations and standards, but with greater mutual decision making and negotiation. In addition, this is a time when a father's respect for women in general is very important. An adolescent girl will monitor closely the way her father treats her mother and will see that as a model for her own choices in relationships.

DG:

Thanks for coming. I have spent and enjoyed about 23 years in Women's Health Care and I hope to give some insight to help you go through adolescence with your daughter. As a physician it does give a little leg up on other dads, especially in my field. And, I was raised in a place where it was a comfortable topic.

The field of OB/Gyn relies heavily on studies having to do with women's health, and focuses heavily on adolescent health. So we have lots of resources on how to have conversations around this topic. They encourage us to mince no words in an interview—especially with teenagers. Speak clearly and concisely and use the language that they are using with you. They are very specific about certain terminology. We are specific about asking questions we want answered: When you ask, Are you sexually active? and the answer comes back, No I just lie there, you know you have asked the wrong question and you don't do that again. Use the exact terms: vaginal penetration, oral sex, anal sex. You have to be comfortable with the language because they are not. What they think about sex is different from what you think about sex. It is your job to elicit this information.

Sex ed does decrease teen pregnancy rates, especially when family members are involved in the conversation—enough studies say that that this is a pretty reliable piece of information. During the last administration, many states went to abstinence only programs because that was what was being funded: 48 states did that, 2 states Maine and California did not do that. They chose to fund own program. Only 2 states had a decrease in teen pregnancy rates: Maine and California. That should remind us that knowledge is power—need to empower daughters and sons with as much info as possible. Otherwise you are sending them out unprepared.

Conversation point: 1. Studies that say about 50% of high school students will report being sexually active, this increases with age so that older students are more sexually active. The studies show that oral sex is about 50%, anal 11%, same gender 1-5% (the stats are depending on study).

So I congratulate fathers for showing up, because this is a point in a kids life when it is easy to check out. Lots of dads do this—they figure they'll survive and get through it. Those of you who make the first step, the others who say, I will have the sex talk with the daughter and she says, I'm not interested in sex and I am late to my volleyball game, and dad says Phew! Glad we had this talk...I hope we can get you further than that.

CK:

I want to let you know there is a list of resources on the table. I have brought books of my own that are helpful so you can see some titles, those are on the right, I've pulled some library books and those books on left. I recommend from an article from the American Psychological Association that you can read online, it is a great snapshot and you can find it at www.apa.org.

CK opened things up with a question:

Doug, we had some good conversations about what you did with your daughter. Can you map out what you did with your daughter and when?

DG: No. Wasn't an easy conversation to have for me, either! But it has to start early.

CK: What age?

DG: Like age 5. They start asking questions. Where do babies come from? What's a penis? I don't know why you wouldn't tell them. They're not really that interested at that point, so they won't listen for long. But then when you get to puberty, they already know about anatomy and have some background information. This really lays the groundwork for more important conversations. I initiated the conversations myself because my daughter didn't come to me. I made it a point to check in with her and do it regularly. I let her know that the door was open and that she had support and she was one well informed child. Knowledge is power.

Audience question: Would you share personally? Did you give personal context? Would you say, this is what happened to me when I was in college or high school?

DG: First, when you see secondary sexual characteristics develop, it is time to have that conversation. And you can say, this is what things were like at my age, this is what was going on for me. You don't have to get it right, you just have to get it going.

SL: Giving info early opens the doors, so she knows you will give her information.

Audience question: What age are you finding girls becoming sexually active? At 6 my daughter kissed a boy and when I talked to her about it, she said it was her idea.

DG: Based on the studies, sexual activity increases as age increases. The younger girl is, the more rare sex is, as they get older, it is more common. Anything less than 12 is rare for sex.

SL: I can remember girls running around playground kissing boys. This was not motivated by sexual arousal though kissing is a sexual activity. It is important to be really aware of the potential for premature sexual activity but also not to panic. Talk to your daughter about it if she kissed this boy, don't leap to conclusions about what it means or why, talk to her about it.

Audience question: Having a daughter who is in college are you thinking about how you handled it with one child versus the other—did you modify your approach? Did you address different things with different kids?

DG: Before this talk I called Alex and asked what I did right and what I did wrong. She said, "You're perfect dad." So that was no help at all. I don't think that I would change a lot of things, but remember they are different people, they develop at different rates, and try to recognize that there isn't a cookie cutter approach. Hope to be open-minded and individualize what I say for what they need. That said, they heard a lot of conversations that weren't really meant for them. They certainly have a comfort level with the subject. And I don't think that my daughter ever came to me—and she knows I am in the business.

SL: I don't know if there are any single fathers here. I was a divorced father and had them in some crucial moments. My daughter came to me and said, "You're going to be so mad." And I thought, did she steal the car? What did she do? And she said, "I got my period." It broke my heart that she thought I would be mad. I thanked her for telling me. She could have waited, gone back to mom's house, told her. Sometimes when you are single dad you get questions that might normally go to the mother.

Audience question: All this conversation about sex is great. But I am hoping for something more general: adolescent girls are known for being very moody, so how do you do things like get them to the dinner table, deal with them in a bad mood, deal with them more generally?

SL: With my girls it varied so much. One literally had to be carried to the table and she would sit there, the other always came bounding to the table. It is important to determine with your spouse, in an intact family, what are the rules of the house and what guidelines are negotiable. Moody is normal. Sometimes important to sit down and find out what is behind the moodiness, because there might be something else. But work hard to avoid power struggles. Clear, relatively few, strictly enforced—these are the guidelines for the rules of the house. Everything else can be negotiated to some degree.

DG: “Because I told you so,” became a dog that didn’t hunt at a given point. If you want to impart your sexual values on them, you better have thought it through and you better have thought about your thesis and your arguments to back up what you are saying because they are going to respect that conversation.

SL: One daughter responded to, “That’s what we do in this family.” The other didn’t.

Audience question: In the past, we were always told to put up a united front. And adolescents like to manipulate. As they get older, they understand the ins and outs of mom and dad being different people so is united front still as critical?

SL: I think so. On the things that matter most you need to agree and stick to it. Adolescents are masters of splitting. Now, your style of sticking to it can be different, that’s ok. The important thing is where you end up. Sometimes for fathers, if the child doesn’t do what they are asked to in the next 10 seconds, the father thinks they are being disobedient, and meanwhile, for the mom, if they do it in the next 10 minutes they were being obedient. But the mother and father need to figure out in how they will coordinate their styles.

Audience: When they go back and forth between the need for affection/protection versus the need for autonomy, does the kid have any real idea that you are going back and forth between offering those things?

SL: It is useful to take cues from the daughter. It really doesn’t matter if Monday and Tuesday are different. You will get physical and verbal cues about what she needs in a given moment. The more difficult time is when the overt signals are to stay away but she is really asking for affection.

With my daughters, the frontal hug was risky and not as ok when they started getting breasts and then when they were comfortable with them it was okay again. But taking the opportunity when they are talking to you to be really attentive to them is important.

Sometimes, there are things that you need to say to them, whether they want to hear it or not. Sometimes they give cues about what they need—oftentimes physical—but we often miss them. Often that is the way that a daughter will tell a father that she needs something. Your daughter may seem closed off, but you need to be available for those moments when she opens up.

Audience comment: So let them lead the dance.

SL: Yes, let them lead the dance. That is a way of respecting their autonomy.

Audience: You talked about avoiding power struggles: what are your thoughts on how to do that?

SL: The Love and Logic Program has good ideas. You can present a couple of choices so it allow independence and autonomy but also indicates where the outside lines are and you can have a little discussion about it. What is the gist of what they want to do and how can you help them experience it? If you can engage in conversation—what are you wanting?—sometimes you can find an alternative or compromise that allows them to experience what they want. Fathers tend to get in more power struggles because we are trained to be more task oriented and trained to be in charge. There is often negotiating room when we find out the core of the request.

CK: What are the key things that fathers teach daughter? What are the things that fathers are responsible for? What fathers are supposed to tell daughters, maybe about playing sports or about how they look?

SL: There is a notion that, in intact families, what the daughter will learn from dad is how to have a relationship and what she will learn from mom is how to be a person in the world. So fathers can engage in a healthy respectful relationship with the mother. He is modeling the behavior that he shows with his wife. There are also many single parent families. One way I would say it is to avoid stereotyping, though there are gender differences. Don't think that we should try to blur gender roles. But the father can appreciate the attractiveness of the daughter in her physical engagement with the world.

Audience: There is too much focus on pretty. Isn't that a problem?

SL: This is a huge problem that is reinforced everywhere. There are some wonderful ways to appreciate your daughter's physicality without telling her she is pretty...My daughter told me that once I came up to her and twirled a curl on her forehead and said that was a really pretty curl. It was specific to the moment, specific to the individual and the moment. That is not about image, but about recognizing the specific girl.

DG: Great advice. And remember that your daughter will take cues from you and your relationship with your spouse. She will take cues from what you talk about when you talk at home: work, clothes, football, whatever it is.

SL: When my daughters were adolescents, they might array themselves like some model they had seen in some magazine and come out and I struggled at first but then I would say, you look great. And then I would find something specific about them, not the model they were trying to imitate.

Audience: I constantly check myself when I tell her she looks beautiful. How much should I weigh that out with, "How do you feel, etc"? You want them to feel good about themselves. So I am looking for a healthy mix of all and I find that a really difficult thing, I want to comment on her appearance when she is working hard on a great outfit. Is it detrimental to say this? Any advice on that?

SL: You can certainly praise the creativity that went into it—a way of saying you see that you see the energy that went into it. You are not comparing their looks. I would tell my daughters that they were beautiful when they were covered with dirt and having a great time and being fully themselves, when the spirit was just leaping out of them—they would always say, no I'm not, and I would say, yes, yes, you are!—if you identify THAT as beauty, that can go a long way.

Audience comment: Someone pointed out to me that it is important to say, You worked really hard at that. Because that is more about what is coming from within. Then you are showing concern for the inside. If we all had cheat sheet with comments to affirm our girls they might list those things: You worked really hard, you have that beautiful curl, etc. A cheat sheet could remind us what words you should and could be using instead of the general ones. That there is more to it than just the physicality.

CK: I've been thinking about the fact that she's just going to be bombarded in her life that she is less than. That is what a girl's mind will do. There are images everywhere. Maybe in the home they should get 100% praise for how gorgeous and wonderful they are. What about that?

SL: I don't think that is the wrong way. That is a good way to do it. I found a book that was just nudes of regular people, not grotesques, not models. I looked at it with my daughters, this is what most of us look like, we're pretty attractive, all of us.

Audience: It is about being present and seeing the whole person. That other stuff is fools gold. There aren't many happy models. The exuberance and life is key.

Audience: There is so much inappropriate television. I think debriefing is the thing to do. At the end of the program we are basically saying, "These are the footnotes. How shallow did you think that was?" We've got to help them with what they are seeing, to understand that it is not based in reality, it is someone trying to sell you something. Or that what you saw is not a good example of how to do it. We have to put footnotes on everything, to protect them, to let them know that these things are not reality.

SL: That is great. Talking about it: like sexuality or anything else: it opens it up. They will experiment with rebelling against it but that core value is there when you do that.

Scott: Are there one or two types of troubled teenage girls? Is there anything you can tell us that can prepare us? And Doug, is there anything simple about the girls who are getting pregnant?

SL: Depression is an issue—usually over the loss of friend or relationship. Also, exclusion from group: because of the theoretical framework of trying on other identities to find out who they are, being excluded from a group can be more critical than we realize. Giving a lot of reassurance—even though it won't always sink in for a while—about your appreciation for them. If it feels like it is getting out of hand, talk to someone who is professional. Usually it is about being excluded, but this is more about something more than just I feel bad, this is about the self being excluded. The early and inappropriate sexual activity is often about being liked, accepted though that is more in Doug's bailiwick.

DG: I see three scenarios. 1. An adolescent girl in my office who is pregnant. She is uninformed, has no information on basic anatomy, no one has spent any time with her. 2. Mom and daughter are in my office. The mom explains that the daughter has begun sexual activity but mom does not want her on the pill because that is green light for more sex and dad has battened down the hatches and locked her in the house. 3. Mom and daughter are in my office—and this is a rare scenario: The daughter is considering sex and they want some information.

If you don't want your daughter to get pregnant, you better have the conversation with her. Explain why, how, what in very clear terms.

Audience: How do you gauge that? Don't want her to have sex, ever. And if you explain contraception, doesn't that seem like that is the green light? Is there an age? 12? 15?

DG: We see lots of teenage girls because they have lots of medical mayhem. The Pill is treatment for lots of things: acne, cramps, period, etc. We see it as medication that is incredibly useful, we don't see it as green light for sex. Parents often do. Explain your values: how you want her to behave and why. You need to know that she does not know what you think.

Audience: What age? Not 7?

DG: They want anatomy at that age, they don't want that much information at that age. They have a short attention span.

SL: There is an old joke, the little girl goes to her parents and asks, where do I come from? The parents take a deep breath and think, Oh boy, here we go. They go through the whole story about where babies come from and the little girl's eyes get big and when they finish she says, Ok, but Susie says she comes from New Jersey, where do I come from?

Audience: Scott raises interesting question. Just saw a book about the disconnect between mental development and sexual maturation. The point was that early sex could create a negative feedback loop almost like meth does. And there isn't the kind of conversation about purity, chastity, anymore in our culture.

DG: It never occurred to me that anyone other than me was going to provide them with the sex ed—I want them to know what my values are, what do they do with all this stuff out there. When they get sex ed, it should be review.

SL: Sex ed was valuable as an opening for conversation with my daughter.

DG: It is hugely valuable, and it is the only education that some kids get. But remember that no one is going to do a better job teaching your daughter about sex and values than you.

Audience: I don't have a daughter, I have a stepdaughter. That's what we're all here for, to find out what age we teach them and it sounds like earlier is better.

DG: When they start to develop secondary sexual characteristics, like breasts and pubic hair you need to be having these conversations. Just because they have developed these things doesn't mean that they think like a woman, but they are going to be treated like a woman in most interactions from that day on. And you need to start preparing them for that.

SL: You can instill values. Just because they are capable of having sex doesn't mean that you ok it. But you can normalize the interest in sexuality—not sexual intercourse, There are values that show what is ok behavior. What we do with our sexuality is what we have some choice about. And some will rebel, they will do what you don't want them to do. You can say that you don't approve. But it is much better to help them to be safe about it if they are doing it rather than hounding them to stop.

DG: Prevention goes a long way. And prevention starts with this conversation.

SL: I had one daughter who became sexually active at 15, the other at 22. And with the 15 year old, I did not object to the age—though I would have preferred later—I objected to the circumstance. It was impulsive and connected to low self esteem and that is what we worked on, the self-esteem.

Audience: Is it better if both parents sit down with them? Or is that overwhelming for the kid?

SL: That one varies with the child. Some are going to be overwhelmed. For others, they'll be fine. Doing it clearly, calmly, and effectively is important.

DG: It is not one conversation, not one summit, It is a lot of them.

Audience: Should we be proactive or wait until she opens the conversation?

DG: I was proactive, she was more comfortable with mom but I wanted to be part of the conversation so I was part of it.

SL: You are an important person in her life. And you can say, I love you and care about you and I want to talk about this. I don't know if there is a parent of an adolescent who has not heard, "I hate you." But even as a stepfather, you are still a very important person in her life.

DG: Would it be more comfortable to have that conversation with your son?

Audience: I like this idea that it is an ongoing conversation, a chance to talk about what is important and what you value.

DG: A lot of fathers more comfortable with sons, but the conversation is the same. Not any different with your son than your daughter, really.

Audience: To some degree, though, that expression is true: When you have a son you are just worried about one little penis, when you have a daughter you're worried about them all.

DG: That is definitely a good segue, but you are going to have to be a lot more thorough than that with details.

CK: If puberty is 12.5, then start talking at 10. I was one of the first to hit puberty and I was getting all this attention, one time walking down the beach and all the lifeguards are getting off the stand thinking I was a 18 year girl. Once I lied about my age and it could have been a bad situation because I basically had no information and didn't really understand about that lifeguard's intentions. My parents talked to me about sex once when I was 16 and they said, "Don't do it." I needed information.

SL: We are sexual beings from conception. This conversation is part of a much larger conversation about being human and being in relationship and being in a family. Sexuality as part of being human. 99% of mothers do an inventory of their newborn to make sure that all the parts are there when their babies are born. That's sexual, that's touching, that's skin, but we don't think about it that way. We are sexual beings and there is no need to separate things out. The conversation starts from the very beginning. When we can use this as our context the conversation is a lot less loaded.