

SEXUAL BOUNDARIES

Are Girls the Guardians of Sexual Boundaries in Relationships?

Based on a survey of 20,000 predominantly evangelical women, spanning the spectrum of theological beliefs and denominations, for our book *The Great Sex Rescue* and our survey of 7,000 women for *She Deserves Better*.



BARE MARRIAGE
HEALTHY, EVIDENCE-BASED, BIBLICAL ADVICE FOR SEX & MARRIAGE

with Sheila Wray Gregoire



SEXUAL BOUNDARIES

Are Girls the Guardians of Sexual Boundaries in Relationships?

Have you ever heard the phrase, “In relationships, men are the engine and women are the brakes”? It reflects a common idea—not unique to Christianity—that in romance men are the ones who push to go further, and women are the ones who stop them from going too far. Even as teens, girls are taught to be the gatekeepers of sexual purity, not only for themselves but for their boyfriends. How common is this idea in evangelicalism?

In our survey, 81.2% of women currently believe that boys will want to push girls' sexual boundaries.

When this idea is combined with traditional Christian views on sexuality—sex outside of marriage is sinful—the result can have a negative impact on girls that continues to affect them into adulthood.

WHAT THE GATEKEEPING MESSAGE TEACHES GIRLS

At the heart of the gatekeeping message lies the assumption that men (and pubescent boys) are wired to be visually stimulated, and that they have a uniquely male need for sexual release. (See our handouts on lust and porn.) Girls are taught to be mindful of how they dress so they don't tempt boys to lust. (See our handout on modesty.) And when it comes to dating, **girls are taught that they are responsible for keeping physical activity from progressing too far, because once a boy gets started he finds it nearly impossible to stop.**

Author Dannah Gresh tells girls that boys “are made to physically yearn for our bodies” (*And the Bride Wore White*). Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa Rice warn girls that 82% of boys have “little ability” and feel “little responsibility” to stop a sexual progression (*For Young Women Only*).

What is the conclusion for teen girls? “With a guy, if you want to be able to stop it, it's safest to not even start.” This message implies that because of their male nature boys are little more than animals operating on instinct, unable to control their own sexual urges. Stephen Arterburn, in *Every Young Woman's Battle*, cautions girls:

“Years ago when I was dating, young men used young women like you for their own pleasure.... Why am I telling you this? Because I want you to know what guys are like—even Christian guys.”

A young man writing for *Brio*, a magazine for teen girls published by Focus on the Family, takes this concept even further. He likens male sexuality to a lion's instinct to hunt, and Christian girls to tourists on a safari. They may want to get out of the jeep and hug the lions because they're so cute (just like they want an affectionate relationship with Christian boys), but when they dress immodestly, **it's like hanging fresh raw steaks around their necks and then approaching the lions.** What else should they expect but to get devoured?

“That's not to say we don't have a responsibility to live self-controlled, pure lives. But a lion is a lion, and a guy is a guy; I don't care who he is. So, help us out. I was the most ‘godly’ young man a parent could ask for.... But I was still a lousy example of what God wanted me to be in my dating life. Give me an inch, and I'd see it as an invitation to go a mile.”

This young man's analogy is perhaps more apt than he realizes. We have a word for the type of creature a lion is: **predator**. And that's exactly what a young man is when he is given an inch and takes a mile. But **girls who are taught they are the gatekeepers of sexual boundaries may not recognize this predatory behavior** for what it is. Instead, they may blame themselves for “tempting” the young man who assaulted them.

“BOYS WILL BE BOYS”

This message that boys are held to a lower standard simply because they are boys is ingrained into girls from a young age. In kindergarten, if a boy **pulls a girl's hair** or **hits her**, or later in middle school, when **he calls her names** or **snaps her bra straps**, she is told it's because he likes her. We excuse poor behavior from boys simply because we supposedly cannot expect them to act any better. How many girls have been told to give their male counterparts patience and grace because girls mature faster than boys?

(Perhaps boys should be taught to look to girls for leadership and guidance because of their maturity.)

Unfortunately, the church has allowed the idea that boys are incapable of self-control to excuse and even rationalize sexually predatory behavior.

THE CONSEQUENCES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

What are the consequences for girls who believe the gatekeeping message?

- 1 They are less capable of identifying date rape.** Our survey found that 44% of respondents could not identify date rape when they graduated from high school, and only 11.8% strongly agreed they could spot it.
- 2 They are less likely to understand the concept of consent.** Our survey found that only 25.9% of respondents were confident that they had a robust understanding of consent upon finishing high school. Other research has also found that abstinence-only sex education frequently omits the concept of consent from its discussions, which may leave teens less able to adequately identify when they have been assaulted.
- 3 They have lower self-esteem.** Our survey of high school experiences found that girls who believed the gatekeeping message were more likely to experience low self-esteem. If a girl grows up believing it's her job to make sure boys don't do bad things, then any time a boy hurts her it's doubly painful because not only has she been mistreated but she believes it's her own fault. She takes on guilt she was never meant to carry.

4 They grow up to be less sexually satisfied and less happy in their marriages.

Women who believed the gatekeeping message in high school are more likely to:

- a** Report engaging in sex with their husbands only because they feel they have to
- b** Say they feel uncomfortable with how their husbands look at other women
- c** Fear that their husbands will look at porn
- d** Feel like their husbands don't really hear them during conflict

However, they are less likely to:

- a** Say their husbands make their sexual pleasure a priority
- b** Report frequently orgasming during sex or express confidence in their ability to become aroused
- c** Feel their opinions are just as important as their husband's, or that their husbands consider their needs, desires, and wants just as much as their own
- d** Feel comfortable bringing up difficult conversations with their husbands

There is a better way to raise our girls—and our boys.



COUNTERACTING THE GATEKEEPING MESSAGE

How can we counteract the harmful consequences of the gatekeeping message? Let's start by talking about what we can teach both **BOYS AND GIRLS**.

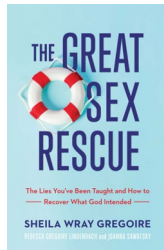
- 1 Teach kids about consent.** Although there is fear that teaching children about consent may accidentally give them permission to start fooling around, we actually found the opposite. In our sample, **being able to identify date rape was associated with having fewer sexual partners** and higher odds of waiting until marriage to have sex. There isn't a downside to teaching your daughter about consent.
- 2 Teach girls to enforce their boundaries.** Their priority is not being "polite" or "nice" at the expense of their own safety and wellbeing. **It's OK to tell boys no** and hold them to it.
- 3 Teach boys to respect boundaries.** We should have higher expectations of their ability to control themselves and be responsible for their own actions. They should be **taught that no means no**. Even in the secular world some teens learn the concept that "anything less than an enthusiastic yes is a no." Why aren't more Christian leaders and parents teaching this?
- 4 Teach both boys and girls to be self-controlled. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit** (Galatians 5:23). We should expect that young people who are following Christ will manifest this fruit—and that includes boys. Titus 2:5, 6 instructs both young men and young women to be self-controlled. Enough with the "boys will be boys" message.

Many Christian adults were raised to believe the gatekeeping message. What can we do for them? Let's talk about what we can teach both **MEN AND WOMEN**.

- 1 Teach men and women that sex should be mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both.** Let's change the narrative that sex is a male entitlement and a female obligation. **Consent still matters even in marriage.**
- 2 Teach men and women about female arousal.** One of the deficiencies about evangelical teachings on sex is that they **never really explain how female arousal works**. Male arousal is easy. According to them, all he has to do is to see an attractive woman, and BAM, he's in the mood. But what gets her in the mood? **Many women don't understand how their own bodies work**—and if their husbands were raised in traditional evangelical churches, they likely have no idea either.
- 3 Throw out the paint-by-numbers approach to sex.** The Christian sex books we reviewed understand that women reaching orgasm is a challenge, and their solution is often to give detailed instructions, in very graphic terms, of how to help her reach climax. While the women in our survey appreciated explicit, detailed advice about how anatomy and arousal work, they were very negative toward the prescriptive "paint-by-numbers" approach to sex. It can make sex feel like a pass/fail thing. **Every person is different and experiences arousal in different ways**. What works for one person isn't necessarily going to work for another, and **overthinking sex to make sure you're "doing it right" is likely to hamper arousal**, not enhance it.

4 Go back to no pressure. Not only do evangelical teachings about sex ignore female arousal, but the gatekeeping message also inhibits it. **When women are taught they are the brakes in the relationship, their brains become accustomed to constantly saying no.** They're focused on stopping the sexual progression, not surrendering themselves to it. Even after they are married and sex is "legal," it can be hard for them to get out of that gatekeeping mode, making arousal difficult.

One thing that can help is to take the pressure off. The women in our focus groups reported feeling much more freedom to explore and experience when there was not simultaneous pressure to perform sexually. When women feel pressured to have intercourse, or even to reach orgasm, they can short-circuit the arousal process if they become self-conscious that they're taking too long or their husbands are getting bored—even if their husbands really want to help them discover arousal. **For many women, the freedom to feel without it going anywhere was one of the keys to unlocking arousal, and orgasm.**



The gatekeeping message harms women—and men—in numerous ways, but these challenges are not insurmountable. In our book *The Great Sex Rescue*, you can find information on how to counteract the effects of the gatekeeping message and help women achieve arousal. And in our book *She Deserves Better*, you can discover what to teach girls to help them build a healthier view of sex, boys, and themselves.



RESCUING AND REFRAMING

INSTEAD OF THIS

“**Boys will push** girls’ boundaries.”

“**Don’t have sex** until marriage.”

“**The wedding night** will be the best night of your life.”

SAY THIS!

“It’s natural and healthy for **both genders to want sex**.”

“You are capable of resisting temptation, and **you are responsible** to not violate anyone else’s boundaries.”

“If you are pressured to do something you do not want to do, that is not a safe relationship.”

“Don’t have sex until you’re married **and turned on!**”

“Sex is a journey of discovery and joy, so **don’t expect to be experts on the first day**.”



BARE MARRIAGE

HEALTHY, EVIDENCE-BASED, BIBLICAL ADVICE FOR SEX & MARRIAGE

with Sheila Wray Gregoire