

## TIP 1

# DON'T OVERREACT

As she sat across from me tears streamed down her face. Guilt and shock mingled in her words. Through brokenhearted sobs she shared with me how she and her husband had found significantly graphic videos on their thirteen-year-old son's computer. Who was this person with whom she was confronted? She felt so confused, so betrayed. Their young teen was active in youth group, kind to his siblings, and sensitive to the needs of others. He was all a parent could want. Of course he was not perfect, but beyond occasionally forgetting homework or skipping chores to play another round of video games, they had little to complain about regarding him. So his

computer activities seemed so out of place, and his engagement with sexual material so much worse than his parents could have imagined. His mother's response displayed the level of shock this discovery brought.

Suspicious of his new desire to be less visible when "playing games" on his computer, she did some searching one day while he was at school. To her complete shock she was not met by gaming sites in his history, but instead vulgar and graphic videos of sexual acts and visits to pornographic websites. Her world felt shattered. The weight of his innocence lost was unbearable as she scrolled through his history. She couldn't help but cry out loud at this discovery.

When her son came home from school that day he was met by his mother, her face clearly swollen from lengthy crying. She attempted to hold it together but at her first initiation to talk to him, she crumbled and the tears were unstoppable. Understanding what must have been discovered, her son immediately was upset and promised never to do it again. He apologized profusely and begged through tears

for forgiveness. She would expect him to do no less. This was her sensitive child; he had been in tune with right and wrong since he was a toddler. He knew by his mother's reaction that his was a moral failure. "How could you do this?" were the only words she had, delivered with uncontrollable sobs.

His father was no less disappointed. His reaction to the discovery was an attempt to assure this situation would never happen again. He took his son's laptop and told him he would never use it again. To secure this reality he threw the laptop in the trash bin. Both he and his wife were reacting to their pain—pain that in that moment was blocking them from considering how best to respond to their son.

In situations like this it is very challenging for parents to know how to respond. As a parent your heart is breaking. You question yourself and your child all at the same time. Perhaps there is anger mixed with the pain. Anger at your child that your trust was trampled. Anger at yourself for being fooled. Anger at your spouse for not being more proactive in

talking to your child about appropriate use of the internet. Maybe even anger at your son's or daughter's friends for sharing the website with them. There may also be grief, disbelief, and shame. Despite this very challenging situation, it is important not to overreact.

When parents overreact to sexual sin in their teens, it can create an environment where sexual sin is perceived as the “unforgivable sin”, but that just is not true. Scripture tells us that “sexually immoral” was once how many of us were described, but we were washed and forgiven (1 Corinthians 6:9—11). Overreaction also inhibits continual communication. It is heartbreaking to see your child fall into sexual sin, but parents need to take their heartbreak to the Lord first, and be willing to explore what it means to respond thoughtfully rather than react shockingly.

Overreaction can also come in the form of punishments so significant that your teen will see you as someone to hide from when they fall. A father once told his teenaged daughter that if he ever found out she was having sex with her boyfriend, she would not be welcome

in their home any longer. In fear of losing connection with a family she loved she began living a life of hiding her sexual activity, leading to deep loneliness. Another teen told me that his parents said if he ever got involved in pornography or sexual activity they would stop paying for his college. As a freshman in college, and a young Christian, he did struggle with porn and this was greatly troubling to him, but it was not something he was going to talk to his parents about because he understood their consequences.

Sexual sin is not the unforgivable sin. It is serious but forgivable. Your teens needs to hear of the cleansing that is theirs in Christ. They need to know that they can be washed clean. They need to know and see that this is where the gospel becomes very relevant. Christ died for their sexual sin. They need to know they can have forgiveness from God, but they also need to know they can have forgiveness from you. If God does not hold this against them, when they repent, then neither should you. Holding forgiveness out to teens makes repentance all the more desirable.

Likewise, do not react in such a way that this stops all conversation about sexual matters. Talking about sex with your teen is awkward and challenging, but overreactions to their mistakes will make it all the more difficult for them to talk to you in the future. To avoid overacting consider the following:

- Go to the Lord first. Pray for wisdom to know how to approach your child. Remember your own struggle for sexual purity, and ask the Lord to keep your heart humble and your words wise.
- Remember that sexual interest is a normal part of growing up. At one time the opposite sex was gross and annoying, but suddenly, with the help of hormones, they have become much more interesting. Your teens are created by God as sexual beings. Walk with them in understanding the good boundaries God has set up for sex, and teach them the value of honoring the Lord with their bodies.

- Give yourself time to reflect before you respond. Instead of simply reacting to situations where your teen has compromised in their behavior or shared a struggle they have had, let them know that you value this conversation and you want to take some time to think through how to answer or respond.

The Lord is merciful to give us many opportunities with our children. If you have had moments of overreacting to their mistakes, take heart in our redeeming God who uses all things for good. Prayerful reflection and sensitivity to the Lord's leading can give you great reason to hope that the next situation that catches you off guard will be an opportunity to respond in step with the Spirit as you lean on Him to guide and direct your responses. He is a good Father who always reacts appropriately even to our overreactions and He can restore these moments.