

Guiding Your Son to Respond Well to Sexual Attraction

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As my 8-year-old son and I walked in a mall, we passed window dressings for Victoria's Secret. My son glanced at one of the seductive photos.

I tensed but calmly said, "Let's try looking the other way together. It will be better for our brains." After we passed the "hallway of seduction," I asked how that picture made him feel. His answer: He felt the "tinglies."

In adult terms, my son was experiencing attraction, when the reward pathways in the brain are triggered and hormones release throughout the body. These tinglies may or may not be accompanied by the physical response of an erection, but either way, the feelings can be exciting and a little unnerving for a young man to process. As parents we can't control when our boys get these feelings, but we can help guide them in their response toward them.

Attraction is natural

Human beings are easily enamored by beauty. And males, especially, are excited by visual stimulation. The challenge for parents is to teach boys to value and appreciate beauty and yet not allow that appreciation to degrade into lust, fantasy or inappropriate behavior. Feeling attraction isn't sinful, but a person's response to it can be. Fortunately, being attracted to the opposite sex doesn't mean our sons are helpless and are required to react however their bodies dictate. They can *choose* how they want to respond.

How the brain works

It is not uncommon to observe kids walking out of a martial arts studio or superhero movie kicking, punching or pretending to be a super fighter with amazing abilities. People often mimic what they see due to mirror neurons in their brains. The brain learns while it observes and allows kids to imagine they are in the experience being observed (though they are not literally there). Sexual images have a similar effect on a boy's thoughts and actions, so it's critical to help boys understand how their brains work so they know why it's important to guard what they watch.

Responding is a choice

Tween boys are exposed to and highly influenced by the sexual messages they receive from the adult world. Most boys will begin to notice magazine covers, advertisements and other images that capitalize on beauty. My son and I discussed how when he saw the image of a woman dressed in underwear, he wanted to look again. This is where the brain can begin to look at a sexual response as a “need” rather than a want. A “want” can be delayed through patience and self-control, but a “need” demands an immediate response.

Images mixed with mirror neurons begin to interact with a tween boy's visual response, sexual curiosity, hormones and physical development, which creates a powerfully stimulating moment that the brain wants to duplicate. Boys may not have control over an initial attraction to a person or an image, but they do have control over how they respond. As parents, we can help our sons understand what is happening in their brains, help them talk through those feelings, and provide them with a strategy to help them make choices that are good for them now and in the future.

Change the channel

On our day at the mall, my son and I sat in the food court and talked about how we each get to choose where we put our eyes (see Job 31:1). In addition to talking about how our brains work, our conversation centered around questions like these:

1. How have you had to guard your eyes and thoughts when watching TV? Movies?
2. How have you had to guard your eyes and thoughts when it comes to what friends are doing or what girls are wearing?
3. Can you ever reach a point where feelings of attraction don't happen? Since you can't, why is it important to find ways to handle the moments when you are attracted inappropriately?

Where we put our eyes makes a huge difference in what we think. When we watch TV, it's easy to change the channel. I've found it helpful to guide my son to see everyday life as an opportunity to change the channel.

I asked, “What can we look at instead?” It could be an upcoming store, the person we're talking with, the ground, the sky — the list is endless. Boys can simply train themselves to look at other things

around them. They just have to decide where the “channel” lands. The brain responds best when we tell it what *to* do rather than what *not* to do.

Once my son understood this, we were able to go deeper:

1. What might be a warning sign that you have to be on guard and attend to what you are seeing?
2. How can you keep from staring at inappropriate imagery?

Then we took this discussion to the next level with these questions:

3. What are some ways you can guard your heart from these images? (Proverbs 4:23)
4. What might be the benefits of guarding your heart?

Over time, my son has learned to recognize how certain pictures or people affect his internal body response and what he can do to “change the channel.” I want him always to know that *he* is the one in control, regardless of what he feels.

The freedom of control

Sexual images are difficult to erase from our minds. It’s particularly difficult for young brains beginning to develop awareness of a sexual world. A boy cannot simply press delete and no longer have a sexual image imprinted in his memory.

What a boy looks at helps shape his reality, and reality is dependent on the emotions he’s experiencing at the time. Visually, boys have strong emotional responses to what they see. When we arm our sons with the knowledge of how their brains are wired, we can inspire them toward guarding their hearts.

To help you begin this important conversation with your son, consider using these talking points:

- Attraction is a natural feeling, but how we respond to the attraction is our choice.
- What we see (where we choose to place our eyes) influences what we think.
- What we think about influences where our bodies eventually go.
- When we guard our brain, we guard our heart, which helps to guard our relationships.

My son and I went over these points, and the general message has stayed with him. He wants to guard what he puts into his brain. He wants to guard his heart. As he does this, his response will offer him the freedom of control over his attractions both now and in the future.