I'm raising my Christian daughter to be sexually assertive. Period.
My daughter is entrenched in those awkward middle-school years between childhood and adulthood. When I was her age I frosted my lips habitually with shimmering fruit-scented lip gloss. Somehow I understood that I was valued for appearing sexy, but I had zero idea how to look or feel sexy. In fact, I had no idea what sexy even was beyond having boys complimenting my P.E. shorts that showed off my sexy legs or Mom and dad turning the television channel when a sexy scene came on. At my daughter’s tender age I don’t encourage her to be sexy, but I do recognize she experiences sexual feelings. At least I did at that age. I was in wonder about my developing body and how it felt different when I straddled a chair or sat with my cold Snapple bottle between my thighs. Of course, I didn’t dare talk about these things; junior high girls were supposed to be all smiles and giggles, especially those of the cheerleading variety such as myself.
I read my Bible as a preteen and it was full of women who experienced a painful sexuality: raped (Genesis 34:1-2; 2 Samuel 13:9-14); pimped (Genesis 12:10-16; 16:1-4); taken as booty (Numbers 31:15-18; Deuteronomy 21:10-14); and even given for rape (Judges 19:22-27). At the church I attended, the ancient women of Scripture were overly sexualized (John 4:17-18); overly sexualized some more (Genesis 38; 2 Samuel 11:2); sexualized into something to be pitied (Genesis 29:23) or sexualized into something suspicious (Proverbs 7:5) or sexualized into something to justifiably fear and punish all women for all posterity (Genesis 3:6). The religious hypersexualized and sexually shamed women that were presented to me taught me silently to believe my sexuality was a liability. It made me ashamed of my developing flesh and soiled panties, especially when the dog would continuously dig them out of my dirty laundry and chew on them in the living room as if they were rawhide.

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We don't have a dog, so my daughter doesn't have to worry about spontaneous underwear bores, but we do go to church. She has already heard her share of bad theology that unnecessarily shames the flesh of women. Just last year the lead pastor unjustly called the Samaritan woman morally bankrupt; and then last week, another inferred she was shameful. Both of these male preachers did not bother to explore the likelihood that the Samaritan woman was likely widowed five times, and therefore remarried four times, and that an ancient Near Eastern woman beyond childbearing years did not typically marry.[1] When women and girls are told to feel shameful about their sexuality, they will feel that way, whether or not the circumstances surrounding their shame are beyond their control.
In my private women’s rehabilitation practice I frequently hear the shame women bear around their sexuality. I have listened to women refer to their sexual anatomy as “twat,” “cooch,” “hoohah,” “cooter,” “beaver,” and other cartoonish words, seemingly ignorant or embarrassed to use the accurate and more self-respecting terms of vagina or vulva. According to research, 65 percent of women beat around the bush (pun intended) to use the words *vagina* or *vulva*.[2]

The vulva’s cornucopia—the *mons pubis*, *labia majora*, *labia minora*, Bartholin glands, and clitoris—is essential to sexual orgasm and pleasure, so reducing female sexual anatomy to “down there” communicates that a woman’s sexual experiences are not important. Overcoming my embarrassment and religiously indoctrinated shame to enlighten my husband about anatomical specifics that pleasure my flesh has been fruitful to our sex life and a healer of sexual shame. As I have matured to discuss my vagina more comfortably, *labia minora*, clitoris, and other wonderfully made female parts of me I’m also discussing the extraordinary substance of female flesh with my daughter in a way that honors her female form. I want her to feel good in her flesh, not ashamed, so I teach her accurately and respectfully about her body. As a clinician I understand how the body perceives shame the same way as pain;[3] I want my daughter to associate pleasure with her sexuality, not pain.

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When I mention the muscle group "pelvic floor" in my yoga class, at least 50% of the women turn their heads, like a knee jerk reaction. Reports show that 93 percent of women have never discussed female sexual anatomy or gynecological health with their mothers.[4] That's unacceptable! This massive neglect in teaching girls to discuss the health and goodness of their bodies has led to severe health, and even deadly, consequences. Many of these consequences are what I rehabilitate clinically, including bladder leakage, overactive bladder, bladder drop, vaginal drop, uterus drop, and associated pelvic pain from pregnancy. The inhibition women have to discuss their body isn't only with their daughters; however, research tells us 94 percent of women are unable to discuss issues "down there" with their physicians, so they just silently suffer with their "little problem."[5] Here are some stats for you:

- One in four women live with painful pelvic symptoms;[6]
- More than 50 percent of women over the age of fifty deal with some form of bladder leak;[7]
- and 65 percent of athletic women such as myself experience high-frequency urinary urge.[8]
The above prevalent issues impair a woman’s quality of life and sexual health, though they are all treatable and even curable. For women to seek care, they must first feel they are deserving of feeling good in their flesh to speak up about their experience in their body and then be unashamed to use the language necessary to communicate these issues to someone who can help them. Just think: if each woman was unashamed to seek treatment for these issues, our lines to the women’s restroom would be much shorter!

In the clinic I have often listened to women refer to their sexual anatomy as gross, dirty, and disgusting. One patient told me women smelled like tacos. *Sigh.* When women wrongly feel that they smell foul, are distasteful, too hairy, or gross for no reliable reason other than their mother, husband, friend, or an old boyfriend told them so, how are they going to achieve sexual experiences that are honoring and pleasurable? How are they going to discuss their health needs with the people who know how to help them? How are they going to feel good in their flesh? How are they going to equip their daughters with language to command respect for their bodies?

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Even when women's pelvic functions are normal, there's yet a cycle of shame (another pun intended) with menstruation. Women's shame about menstruation is linked to an increased risk in sexual decision-making; whereas women who are comfortable with their bodies and body functions, including menstruation, are found to be more sexually assertive, experience more positive sexual experiences, and engage in less sexually risky behaviors.[9] A sexually assertive woman can be threatening to Christians who confuse the power of God with man's power over women, but these are also the same brothers and sisters who shame junior-high girls as sexual and neglect to recognize that the legacy of women in Christology—Rahab, Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, and Mary—each found honor through sexual assertiveness. Some Christians confuse sexual assertiveness with casual sex; but then I have patients who confuse their vaginas with tacos or beavers. The open discussion of female sexuality is only the start for women to be honored in their sexual experiences. I often remind my daughter that a menstruating woman is shedding blood for the renewal of life, and that's the business of God, not something gross to be ashamed of.
As a mother who is skeptical about what my daughter hears in church, I am encouraged to know from Scripture that Jesus never condemned the sexuality of a woman (John 8:11), called women unclean, or made innuendos that women were a liability because they were sexual. In fact, each time Jesus interacted with a woman he elevated her to a central position (potentially embarrassing her) so that others could understand her sexual experience in more detail. Jesus cared about honoring the sexuality of women; he also cared for their sexual health (8:47-48).

I'm breaking the silence that communicates the idea that my female flesh is something shameful to be hidden. I'm raising my daughter to understand that virtue is not about hiding her flesh but in honoring and respecting its miraculous functions and form. We all can do this, not only in action, but in language. Let's shape the image of girls and women as God has shaped us as good (Genesis 1:31).
The shaming of women theologically is due to man-made interpretations of Scripture—ideas built on guydolatry—man as god to women. Guydolatry has no doubt contributed to vulgarizing, exploiting, and neglecting the flesh of women, but so has women’s silence about their bodies. As we enter a postmillennial era of Christianity, it might be worth recognizing that God created women as more than wombs (Luke 11:27-28) or obedient service stations to men (10:40-42). It also might be worth elevating women’s issues the way Jesus did. I’m taking my daughter to church because I want her to have a vibrant faith, but I’m also quick to point out and challenge any messages that are ignorant or even shameful to the power of women. I’m modeling for my daughter that the faithful woman doesn’t have to say “please” with a smile to seize the power of God (8:44), even for a sexual issue. I’m elevating the health of women not only in my professional life but in my home and faith as well. I’m raising my daughter to be sexually assertive, because I want her to know the pleasure of feeling God’s power in her female flesh. She is a dwelling of God (Romans 8:11), and that is worthy of healthy respect and honor. Period.


[2] The Eve Appeal, “Why -vagina- should be part of every young woman’s
vocabulary, The Eve Appeal (July 2016), https://eveappeal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Eve-Appeal-Vagina-Dialogues.pdf. This research was conducted by The Eve Appeal, a gynecological health research center in the United Kingdom. I could find no similar research from US research literature, which indicates the topic of how Americans discuss women's sexual anatomy is neglected by US researchers (who, too, are people who may be ashamed or afraid to discuss female anatomy).


[8] Maria Teresa Schettino et al., Risk of Pelvic Floor Dysfunctions in Young Athletes, Clinical and Experimental Obstetrics and Gynecology 41, no. 6 (January 1, 2014): 671–76.

[9] Deborah Schooler et al., Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame,
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