



Episode #236

**Amy Lang On How "The Talk" Can Keep Your Kids Safe
Online During Covid-19**

November 24, 2020

Debbie: Hey, Amy, welcome back to the podcast.

Amy: Thank you. I'm so excited to talk to you and your people.

Debbie: Yes, this is another important conversation that we need to have. And I think we've talked for the show a couple of times before. And I think it's important to kind of update and check in, because of what's happening in the world and COVID. And just the amount of time our kids are spending online and spending alone and feeling isolated, and all of that stuff. So before we start talking about that, can you just take a few minutes and do your, your general introductory spiel about yourself?

Amy: I'm happy to. So I am a sexuality educator. And I have been for a very long time, I think I'm coming on like 27 years, which scares me. But anyway, so I started out doing pregnancy, abortion, birth control, counseling, and then that led me to do general sexual health education and counseling. I worked for Planned Parenthood for a couple of years. And I just had figured I was going to be an amazing sex talker when I had kids. And I had my son Milo. And it turns out that I would rather talk to a pregnant 14 year old than my four year old about his penis. So that was my little like, moment where I realized I needed to get some help. So I started doing some research. And I also have a master's degree in adult education. And so while I was figuring this out for myself, I realized that, oh, I could combine my two favorite things, talking about sex and doing adult education. So I did, and that was about 14 years ago, and I started Birds + Bees + Kids. And I've been helping parents and other folks talk with kids about sexuality, love and relationships. I also focus part of my work on understanding things like playing doctor, what's normal, what's not, and how to help kids with that. So that's what I do. And sadly, the porn and all that has become, you know, right now, in particular, I'm getting lots of emails and calls from folks about like, what do we do with this time exactly what you just said, right, like, love so much more time online. And I'm really glad we're going to be able to talk about this because it's confusing and scary.

Debbie: It is, and I'm so glad that you do the work that you do. I think for many people, certainly many of my listeners, certainly for me raising my hand, this can sometimes feel really uncomfortable to talk about. But it's so important that we are armed with information. And I think you're doing just such a great service to families everywhere. So thank you.

Amy: Thank you.

Debbie: So yeah, let's talk a little bit more about what you are seeing and, and hearing from people. One of the things I was thinking about in preparing for this was just even in the very beginning of COVID in and classes moving online over Zoom, and we were hearing reports of people crashing Zoom rooms and, and sharing content that wasn't appropriate. And, you know, I know that there are just so

many things, possibilities, concerns that people have right now. So what are the things that you're noticing and seeing right now as a result of where we are with the COVID pandemic?

Amy: Well, I think one of the things that's happened is that before the pandemic, people who are pretty loosey goosey in terms of monitoring and parental controls, because lots of folks think, Oh, my kid would never look at that my seven year old would never Google boobs, my 12 year old, there's not a possibility that he would be interested in sex in any way. So we have this, we have this kind of naivete about, you know, what our kids were going to see. And then whoops, here's COVID. And here they are online, you know, for hours a day, and they don't have the like that backup protection. And so it's really a lot easier for them because they get bored, and they Google stuff, their friends are sending them stuff, and it's just this perfect storm. So the terrible part, the hard part is that Yeah, kids are being exposed to way more stuff than they would have been for a variety of reasons. But I'm a bright side or the bright side, his parents are being much more motivated to keep their kids safer online. And that fantasy about exposure is kind of getting chipped away. It's not totally gone. So that's one of the main things that I'm like, that's kind of what happened. And so now what I'm hearing is that my kids alone in his room, we just figured out that he's been looking at porn. You know, my kids were playing online with someone and someone said, Hey, check this video out. And so also we're all so stressed out as parents, it's really hard to pay attention, right? Like everybody's a mess. And so that's the other thing is like, Oh my God, one more thing, right? Like one more damn thing I have to think about and deal with.

Debbie: Yes, and you just really summed it up. Sorry, I'm sitting with that word. One more damn thing that we have. To be thinking about because, yeah, this is an incredibly stressful time. And I am hearing so much from families who are struggling to get their kids to attend to their classes and to just kind of navigate hybrid or remote learning. And this just feels cruel that this is an additional thing we have to be really concerned about. So first of all, I'm wondering how people are, you said, the people are figuring out that this has happened or is happening with their kids? How are parents becoming aware that their kids may be exploring content that is not appropriate for them?

Amy: Usually, they're stumbling upon it. Like, they might think, Oh, I should probably check the browser history because they're online so much. And then oh, surprise, somebody spent a little time looking at something that you know, you can't unsee things, or they're hearing from a friend, like, that's what's happening a lot is like, someone will say, hey, my kid saw this stuff. And now, you know, I'm worried. And it turns out my friends, kids, too. So there's like more communication about it. But there's a lot of shame around it. Like, I think people are really embarrassed and ashamed that they didn't take steps to protect their kids online. So it's also not talking. But also I think people have, you know, brains, I mean, just think about it, like they're thinking about it now, right? And it's his background worry. So it's coming up. Like, it's kind of top of mind for folks. And then they hear a rumor, they hear a story, it happens to their kid. So it's just think it's just kind of come to the surface. And I'm just trying to think of

like, Is there like a perfect example. But really, the deal is that people suddenly discover that their kid has been looking up boobs, or like, I had a family whose daughter Googled horses and ended up in porn land. So that's the other thing that's happening innocently. It's not like they'll go out and look for, you know, hey, what's a threesome? Right? Like, they could be looking at something else, and misspelling things and, you know, sort of that typical stuff from before. But I also think that the, you know, the interwebs has gotten a little more savvy, in some ways, I'm clearly not a technical person. And, and so it's pushing that stuff more and more, just because of the way the interwebs are now it's just different than it was five years ago.

Debbie: So you know, you mentioned that parents are feeling embarrassed or ashamed that they haven't had these conversations before. And it is something right to hear a conversation like this, like the one we did last year or two years ago, where we talked about how important it is to have these conversations. And then now all of a sudden, gosh, I never did that. So, you know, how do you first of all, talk to parents? How do we get parents past that, that guilt or shame or embarrassment that, you know, they didn't take action? And now they may be feeling? In addition to the guilt, they may be feeling like it's too late. I've screwed up. And now we're in dangerous territory here.

Amy: Well, the good news is, there's actually a really easy answer to that, which is to apologize and just say, you know, hey, I made a mistake, we made a mistake, we should have been talking to you about this sooner. And you know, you're old enough now. And here we go. And, you know, we the place you actually start is with the sex talks is with like opening the door to having conversations about sexuality, love, and relationships. So if you use that as your entry point, like so you say, Hey, we should have been talking with you about sex and all that stuff sooner. And so now we're going to start talking about it. That's the only thing you need to say, especially to older kids like the 10 and uppers. The apology is really important because it shows them that you're responsible because you are responsible for their online exposure. It's not their responsibility to be safe online, it's your responsibility. Think about it, like putting a seatbelt on, right? We wouldn't let our kids get in a car without a seatbelt. So that apology, and then with kids who are 10. And under, it's easier, because you can just say, Hey, you know what, you're old enough now, because they need to know what like sex is before they can really understand, like, fully understand what you know, the yucky stuff is and have a context for it. And we want them to have a healthy context for sexuality. We don't want them to think that, you know, two guys on a horse and a woman is normal or typical. So I really gotta kind of like back up the truck a bit, and then enter into the porn conversation. And the good news with talking to older kids is that they can understand this more quickly, more readily than like an eight year old or seven year old. So it's, um, it's kind of one of the things I like about talking with older kids. And sometimes I think parents think, Oh, I have to be like, all firm and stern and like apologizing, that's gonna like, take away my power from a child. And actually what happens when we apologize to our kids is that they lean into us. We're human, and we're modeling, right? Because they make mistakes too, right? They're gonna make mistakes online, they probably already have. And so we want to set them up to understand that

like we're here for them. And by apologizing, that's the very first step. And it is not hard to apologize and it feels good, because I'm betting you're sorry.

Debbie: Well, I just love that language. That was one of my questions too, you know, how do we start these conversations? Literally? What are the words that need to come from our mouth and so maybe just repeat that one more time for the littles and for ten and up, give us that first sentence?

Amy: Okay, so the first sentence with the littles, so we're talking like eight and under, is just really simply say, Hey, you know what, I've been thinking, you're old enough now, no matter how old they are, you're old enough now for us to start talking about bodies, baby making boundaries, and then all that sex stuff. Do you know what that word is? Do you know what that means? And see what they say. And then with little people, and everybody, they need books, and then you just say, here's this book, we're going to read this book together, boom, done, you're off and running. They're much easier to talk to. With the, with the 10 and older. you apologize, and you say, You know what? I made a mistake. I'm sorry, I didn't think you were old enough for us to start talking about this. But now I know you are. So we're going to start talking about sexuality, relationships, consent, all that stuff. Because I want you to feel good and confident about this part of life. I want you to know what's healthy, and how to, you know, manage this, because it's going to be here before, you know.

Debbie: And so what about for even older kids who you know, I know, the statistics say and you would know better than me. But there's a large percentage of teens who have been exposed to pornography online. I don't know again, what the exact numbers are. But assuming that teenagers have been exposed in some way, how do we then begin that conversation if we haven't been talking about it before?

Amy: So again, you just want to say like, I'm all about the apology with this, who say, hey, and look, here's the thing, I'm really sorry, I'm guessing you probably seen some foreigner your friends have. And here's the deal. Like, I should have been talking to you about this from the beginning. But I'm uncomfortable. And I also just want to let you know that you know, porn is not healthy. It's not real sexuality. It's not real sex. It's like a cartoon. People don't look like that. do stuff like that, you know, when they're having, you know, a typical, normal, regular, whatever sex life, and they are gonna be like, yeah, you're I don't want to talk about this. And then, you know, with the porn thing, we just have to talk about it. And doing a little research about what language to use. There's some, okay, places to get information about how to talk to kids about porn, a lot of it, unfortunately, is really sort of shame based. So just being clear, like, it's normal to be curious, this is not a healthy place to get your information, and then kind of seeing what they say and do. And if you have not had monitoring on their devices, then you say, and here's the deal, we're going to be putting monitoring on your devices, we want to make sure that you're safe, and that you're making good decisions when you're online. And they're not going to like it, but you just sell it Tell them it's the price of admission. And remember, you're the parent, you're the boss of their everything. And if you're really late to the game, like they're 17, 18, 19, then don't bother. I mean, don't bother, because you're just

gonna look like it, you're gonna look really dumb. And so, you know, there's this point where, you know, not that the ship has sailed, but you really like in terms of the internet stuff, like the online monitoring and stuff, canna's kind of pointless, but that the good thing about having older kids, like, I'm all for, like, 12, 13, and over, just talk about all of it. So don't be cagey about it. I mean, just be straight up about, like the impact of pornography. There's a website, Make Love Not Porn, she's got some really good resources there. And, you know, do some research yourself about how to talk about porn with teenagers in a way that's not shaming, because they've seen it, they may be using it, you know, you really want to be clear that it's not a hell, you know, again, like back to that it's not healthy sexuality. It's not really it's not normal sexuality, and then see what they do with it. And they may be all grunty and not responding and telling you they've got it, but they don't.

Debbie: Okay, that's so helpful. And I would like to know a little bit more about the monitoring software, you know, are there I don't know if there are certain ones that you recommend. So certainly, you're an advocate of that, especially for kids who are under 17. But is that something that parents should let any child know that they're doing or is it something that with younger kids who just do and they don't need to know how do you handle that?

Amy: Well, we don't do any spying. So what we say is, hey, we're putting monitoring and parental controls on to all of the devices that you access the internet on, which could be horrific, like there could be a lot of them. And you just be straight up about it. And then you tell them why we want you to be safe online. There's a lot of yucky stuff out there. And we're going to be watching where you go online, this is to keep you safe. And if we see something that we're worried about, we'll just have a conversation about it. And think about it like guardrails. So when they're really little, you know, ideally, they are not even really able to get online like five and six and under, they shouldn't be able to go anywhere on the interwebs. And if they do, it needs to be super locked down. And as they get older, you can remove some of the parallel controls, you're always going to monitor, you're going to monitor monitor, monitor. And then by the time they're in middle school, they should have free range, they should be able to go anywhere they want on the internet, but you're still monitoring, so you get a weekly daily digest. A couple of products that are really good, circle, and bark are really great. They're easy to install, there's a thing of a jig that gets attached to the router. Again, I'm not technical, there's an app, you can do things like if someday when people can come to your house again, you can make the internet not work for anyone. So you can turn things off and on, you can make a time they can be online. They're really, really helpful. I know some of your listeners are not in the US. Qustodio, that works in other countries other than the US. So this is required, like this is not optional. It's required, and I don't care how good your kid is or how smart they are. Everybody's curious about sex, everybody.

Debbie: Okay, thank you for sharing that. And listeners, I'll include these in the show notes as well. So if you didn't have a chance to write them down, check out the show notes. And you can look into those monitoring devices or software thingamajigs to use Amy's words. So I guess I'd love to know, in addition to

monitoring, are there are things that parents should be looking out for, like are there signs that we can tune into to know if our kids have been exposed to something or troubled by something they've seen?

Amy: Yeah. So like if we're looking behaviourally with younger kids, their behavior might change. So they might seem and this is just such a hard time, right? Because all of her behaviors changed. But if they're particularly withdrawn, so these are like pre puberty people, and particularly withdrawn, they seem more anxious. They are sneaking or hiding when they're online. Like if you walk in, like I had one family tell me that they let their kiddo be they're actually on vacation. And this was before. They were kind of loosey goosey. And he had the iPad, and he was really interested in birth. And so they've been watching birth videos. So he was up in his bedroom, and the mom came in, and he just took that iPad and like shoved it against his chest. And you know, little kids are awesome, because they can't hide crap, right? Like, so he's all weird looking. And she's like, what's going on? And he had found his way to porn. So you want to watch their behavior around it. So if they seem sneaky, secretive, if they just seem uncomfortable or weird. And again, you know, before this was easier to spot because there's a lot of reasons to pee all those ways right now. And trust your gut and check and ask, you can just say, hey, we've seen anything, Jackie, or weird or scary online. And did you hear my tone right there? Hey, like, how's the weather, same tone, like really chill, don't have an event. And so just check in with them and see what they say. And it's super important to say you won't be in trouble. If you tell me you won't be in trouble. Just want to make sure you're safe. And then with the older kids, lots of time again, this is hard with teenagers, right? Like lots of time in the room, in their bedroom, with their phones with their devices, being really secretive about their phones and like not letting you see anything like being weird if you have access to their phone. If you've noticed any adult like banter, who's because we should all be kind of listening in when our kids are talking with each other. So any kind of adult like banter, if you hear really gross slang, which I'm not allowed to use right now, but think of the things that are kind of ugly words for private parts and sex acts. So if you hear anything like that, and then again, just check in and say, Hey, how are you doing with this? Like, I know, this is something that lots of kids see. You know, you can tell me if you've used it, you know, it can become really a problem for folks. One of the problems about right now and porn use is that people use it to relieve anxiety and oftentimes, that's why they're using it. It's kind of a tool to help themselves feel better, even though it's backward, right? Like that doesn't make sense to us as adults, but it may because I know some People who are listening right now use porn, and you might use it in a healthy way. So thinking about it in terms of behavior changes and secrecy. And, you know, you know your kids. So if they're being weirder than normal, again, technical terms, like if your gut tells you that something's off, something is off, right? Like we all know, as parents, we, if we ignore our intuition, that we're making a mistake, or intuition is rarely, rarely wrong.

Debbie: So I know, you know, we talked about this in the last conversation we had about this. And also, I'll link to that in the show notes. Because listeners, definitely check that out. It was a great conversation, we went deeper into some of these topics. But I know that there is a belief that talking about these things will

actually create more curiosity. And, you know, we might be basically opening the door and saying, oh, all of this stuff exists, you know, and kids might be more inclined to check it out. So why does it actually talking about pornography, talking about sex in general actually help keep kids safer online?

Amy: Well, if they already know what sex is, and they already know your values about it, and they already know, from an early age that the place to learn about sex is from you, because you should be their go to person like, and you can say, I'm your go to for this. I know a lot about this part of life. And if I don't know, I'll figure out the answer. That's why we have books for you to look at. You know, these are safe places to learn about this. And, you know, an informed child is an empowered child, and an empowered child feels better, and they make better decisions. Because if your kid knows what sex is, it's really easy to say, and PS, there's this stuff called porn, it is sexual, it is not for kids, it's adult stuff, it can really mess you up, it's really can be really scary and confusing. So we're talking to you about this now. So that when you see that, you'll have a better understanding of what it is. And you'll be less curious because it does decrease curiosity, if they have safe places to go. And they know they can talk to you. So if they have questions about their body, like, why are they getting boners 24. Seven, if they have a safe place to go to learn about that, like the, there's some good puberty books, which I can hook you up with, like, if they have a safe place to go read about, like the random acts of senseless boners, they're going to be less likely to Google that right. And really just helping them understand like, we want them to have this basis of healthy sexuality, we want to be sex positive with our kids, which doesn't mean we're promoting polyamory and BDSM. And all of that, I think people don't understand what sex positive means. It means that we present sexuality as a healthy, positive, wonderful, fun part of life. And imagine if that's the message you got when you were growing up. And so it protects them. And it's not a silver bullet, it isn't, but it gives you like, when you know that you've been working hard on this part of parenting, if they see it, they're going to be less likely to not look at it because their curiosity has already been satisfied elsewhere. And you know, with older kids, I have a whole bunch of sexy young adult books for kids to look at and to read. You know, helping them understand that, you know, sexuality requires and sex requires imagination. And that when we look at porn, we think that sex so it takes away imagination. So just helping them to see the bigger picture. And you know that, like I said, it isn't gonna fix it all. But it will definitely help them make different decisions.

Debbie: Also, for listeners, the very first conversation I had with Amy, which was probably in year one of this podcast, was just about having, you know, the talk, it was about sex ed for differently wired kids. So I will also include a link to that in the show notes, it's definitely worth going back and listening to that if you haven't yet had these conversations, or maybe you have, but you want to make sure that you've covered it the way that is best for your family. So one last question. And then I would love you to tell us a little bit about where people can reach you and to tell us about your awesome podcast, which I just love. So is there anything else that we can be proactively doing to protect our kids, especially during this time, and we know that they're, they're just more isolated and more vulnerable to everything that we've been discussing today?

Amy: Yeah, I would say turn it off. Like I would say, I know it's hard for all of us but to turn it off like have a day where no one is online. And that's going to mean you're going to have to interact with people and it's going to give everybody's brain and body a break from this. So having scheduled times where they turn it off. This is why you have monitoring because you can shut it off. Like you can literally make it so they cannot get online. Making sure they don't have any devices in their bedroom after a certain time talking openly about it, you know, really helping them to understand, but like looking at that stuff, it's just going to increase their anxiety. You know, their isolation now is just so hard. So figuring out ways for them to have playdates with their friends that are online, you know, if they are gaming, which I know everybody is. Just make sure they can't go anywhere online when they're gaming. And again, like it's this is about conversation and connection. I think we're all feeling disconnected in multiple ways. So finding time where you are filling their love bucket, you know, one of my favorite favorite things to do with kids is something called special time, which is where you let them lead the play, and you don't bossing them around at all, like they're in charge of what you're doing that also will help them feel more calm and satisfied. And I wish that we weren't having this time, like we all do. And it's a challenge to parenting, right. But you know, parenting is hard. And, you know, maybe I'm adding some, you know, I'm piling on a little more hard to your parenting, but the outcome is going to be better for everyone. And we'll feel that you will feel better. And which is really important, because if you feel better, they're gonna feel better, right? Everybody's pinging off everybody else right now.

Debbie: So true. So tell us about the resources that you have available at Birds and Bees and Kids and tell us about your awesome Just Say This podcast.

Amy: So at my on my website, Birdsandbeesandkids.com, there's a bunch of stuff there for you, I have an online resource center called the Birds and Bees Solution Center. And that is like a one stop shop for you to have these conversations, it's pretty much got everything you need in it to become their go to. I have an online bookstore with curated books by age group. So you can see a bunch of different options for your books. There. Also, I've been blogging since God was a boy. So there's tons of stuff in my blog, and just lots and lots of opportunities. And I also do quickies with parents, which is just a 30 minute consultation. So if you have something that's feeling urgent, you can get to me. We can take care of a lot and a half an hour, it turns out. And then my podcast which I'm super happy with. And thank you for saying it's awesome. It's called Just Say This and it's advice column style. So parents call in, leave me a voicemail, and then I answer it on the show. And it is everything from I think this week's episode is anal sex. somebody's asking about that kid asking about that. Something about a 12 year old girl and I don't remember a puberty thing. And then something about a three year old playing doctor. So it's totally potluck. I just answer whatever feels right to me in the moment. So it's been super fun. And I love advice columns. So it's totally, like totally my thing.

- Debbie: Mm hmm. It's great. And also what I also appreciate, as someone who listens to many podcasts is the episodes are 15, 20 minutes. So and again, you know, if you look at the titles, you can see so I can just scroll through, like, Oh, I need to know about this, because this has come up in our house, and then I can just get your very smart, brief answer to that question. And I feel so much more informed, and information helps you feel less anxious. So it's just such a great thing you're putting out there. Thank you.
- Amy: Yeah. And I actually if you decide to listen to it, listen to every episode, because you're going to get something out of the three year old playing doctor because it might be like your kid might have played doctor three. And then when you hear Oh, yeah, this is completely typical. It's going to relieve your stress. Because if you've been thinking that your child like Hector the molester, but really they were just curious about their friends, vulva, that actually goes a long way to relieving that anxiety just in parenting in general. And, you know, I'm not for everyone. There's a lot of swearing. And I am very direct. So yeah, thank you, Debbie. I really appreciate it.
- Debbie: Yeah. Well, thank you. Thank you for everything that you shared today. And hopefully this, you know, information is going to help people feel like they've got more tools, more resources, and we can eliminate some of those deer in the headlights moments. And I just encourage everyone to check out the resources that Amy shared today. Thank you so much. And I look forward to our next conversation. We'll be out of COVID and we'll have something else to discuss.
- Amy: Sounds good. Yeah, thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Amy Lang's website Birds + Bees + Kids](#)
- [Birds & Bees Solutions Center](#) (everything you need to become your child's go-to birds and bees source)
- [Just Say This! Podcast](#)
- [Amy's book recommendations for parents and sex ed](#)
- [Birds & Bees Kids on Facebook](#)
- [Birds & Bees Kids on Instagram](#)
- [Amy Lang Talks About Sex Education and Differently Wired Kids](#) (Tilt Podcast episode)
- [Sex Educator Amy Lang Talks About Kids and Pornography](#) (Tilt Podcast episode)
- [Circle: Parental Control and Internet Filtering App](#)
- [Qustodio Parental Control Software](#)
- [Make Love Not Porn](#)