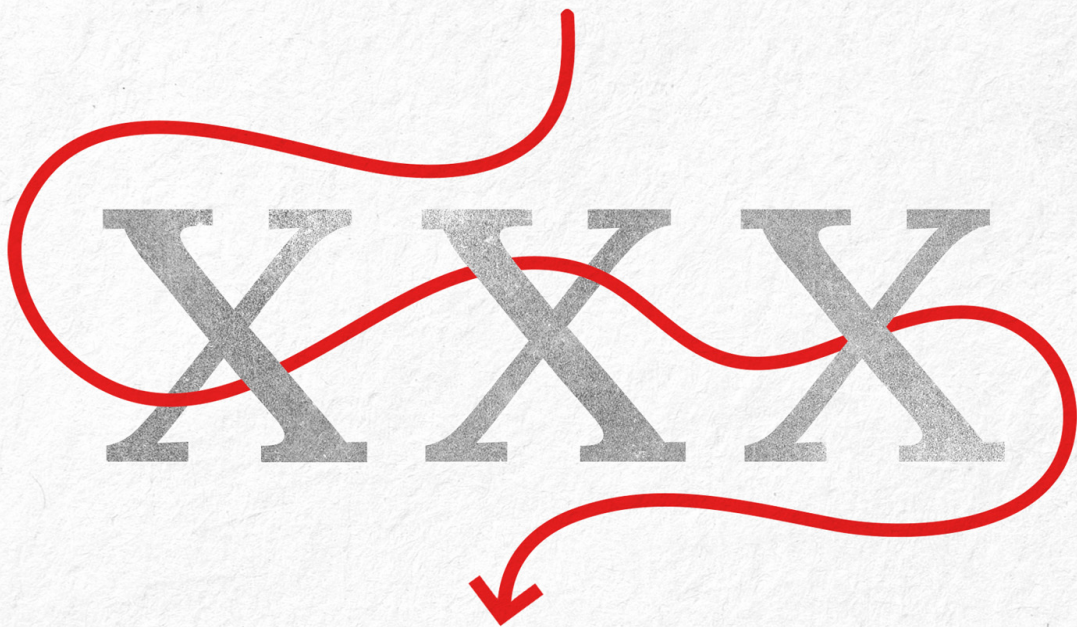


sex expectations



*Helping the
Next Generation
Navigate Healthy
Relationships*

B A R B W I N T E R S

Praise for *Sexpectations*

“In *Sexpectations*, author Barb Winters gives all who love teenagers a great gift. She comes alongside responsible adults as they help the young people in their lives navigate the difficult world of relationships. Using a solid biblical foundation, she shares encouragement and solid structure to help us stay God-centered when tackling this hard subject. In this book, every reader is sure to find the hope and affirmation so needed in our world today.”

—**Edie Melson**, award-winning author and Director of the Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers Conference

“Barb Winters has done an incredible job addressing tough issues all families, churches, and youth groups face. As a therapist, school counselor, and mom of young adults, I’m grateful she is frank about the effects of a sexualized culture while also pointing to a better way in Christ. A must-read for all parents, youth leaders, and anyone needing to connect with today’s youth.”

—**Brenda Yoder**, Licensed Mental Health Counselor, School Counselor, author of *Fledge: Launching Your Kids without Losing Your Mind*

“*Sexpectations* is a calming voice to parents in the midst of the chaos of trying to talk with older kids about sex. Barb candidly shares her own parenting journey to demonstrate that even when we do not do this perfectly, there can be hope for our kids. I appreciate how Barb goes beyond just ‘what to say to kids’ by including work we need to do as parents throughout this process. *Sexpectations* is an emotional rock for parents to stand on as they navigate these waters.”

—**John Fort**, Director of Training at Be Broken Ministries

“Barb will help you understand the hookup culture and what has gone wrong with relationships, which is at the heart of pornography. But she won’t leave you without a remedy. She gives hope for recovery and restoration. A big thank you goes to Barb Winters for addressing a topic not many Christian writers are brave enough to take on!”

—**Dena Yohe**, Cofounder of Hope for Hurting Parents and award-winning author of *You Are Not Alone: Hope for Hurting Parents of Troubled Kids*

“Barb Winters offers a gift to parents and families learning to navigate a cultural minefield. This book is packed with relevant truths augmented with relatable illustrations. She identifies the pitfalls of unhealthy relationships, shares foundations for healthy ones, and provides principles to pursue recovery from wrong choices. *Sexpectations* meets contemporary needs by offering practical help. You’ll find yourself referring to this valuable resource again and again.”

—**Ava Pennington**, Bible Study Fellowship teacher and author of *Reflections on the Names of God*

“As someone who has helped families dealing with porn addiction and sexual sin for twenty-four years, I can confidently say Barb does a great job addressing the issue in *Sexpectations*. This book is a powerful resource for any person or family trying to come to terms with habits for healthy relationships. More importantly, it will provide readers with real tools to help those they love to know how to heal and find sexual wholeness in Jesus Christ.”

—**Dr. John Thorington**, author of *Pure Teens: Honoring God, Relationships, and Sex* and Owner/licensed therapist of Restoring Hearts Counseling

“Barb courageously takes her experience as a mom blindsided by porn and has written this tremendously valuable resource for others to help kids navigate today’s hypersexualized culture. Nearly thirty years ago, my own addiction began at the age of ten when my older brother secretly brought pornography into the home. Had a book like *Sexpectations* been available then, I am certain the pain, shame, and isolation I experienced could have been avoided. Helping a child understand that pornography is not only outside God’s design for sex but also creates unrealistic expectations will absolutely set them up for healthy relationships later.”

—**Crystal Renaud Day**, MAPC, Founder of SheRecovery and author of *Dirty Girls Renewed*

“When raising kids in an increasingly sexually broken world, it is no longer enough to pick up the wounded; we have to go on the offensive. Barb Winters has done an excellent job picking up the torch on behalf of caregivers everywhere by unflinchingly, thoroughly, and lovingly

exposing the depth of the challenges before us—and the hope that can be found in proven, practical, Christ-centered solutions.”

—**Rosie Makinney**, Founder of Fight For Love Ministries and author of *Fight For Love*

“*Sexpectations* is about so much more than sex. It provides a biblically sound roadmap to understand how culture has warped relationships and intimacy, and more importantly, how families can emerge strong and healthy, defying this distortion. Parenting in the digital age is one of the most challenging experiences any of us will ever have, and Barb shares her own stories with refreshing vulnerability. This book will supercharge your sense of purpose as a parent, giving you the courage and tools to connect more deeply with your kids and more resolutely stand against the toxicity of our culture.”

—**Sarah Siegand**, Cofounder of Parents Who Fight

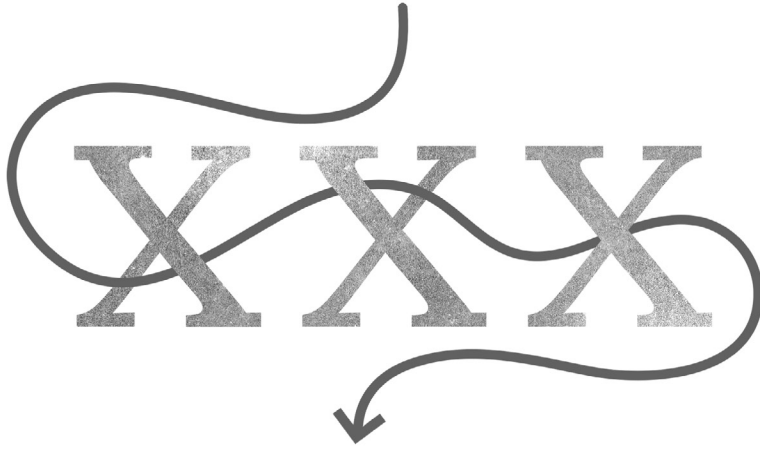
“Barb Winters presents a compelling, easy-to-understand guide for discussing the prevalent issues of sexting, pornography, and cultural immorality for today’s youth. True change happens when we understand the mechanics behind an issue and can turn our eyes to God rather than lament the negative side effects of our toxic culture. As trusted adults in our children’s lives, we need to arm ourselves with the right knowledge to rescue our kids from the influence of culture. Reading *Sexpectations* is an excellent step toward that goal.”

—**Melanie Hempe**, BSN, Founder of ScreenStrong and author of *Can Your Teen Survive—and Thrive—Without a Smartphone?*

“I am excited Barb Winters has written *Sexpectations*. She is a fantastic resource for people looking for practical tips on how to talk with pre-teens and teens about healthy relationships amidst today’s culture of pornography, social media, and hookups. I am confident her book will be a blessing to many.”

—**Dr. John D. Foubert**, PhD, author of *Protecting Your Children from Internet Pornography* and board member of National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE)

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Next Generation
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B A R B W I N T E R S



LEAFWOOD
P U B L I S H E R S
an imprint of Abilene Christian University Press

SEXPECTATIONS

Helping the Next Generation Navigate Healthy Relationships



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P U B L I S H E R S

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To all the parents, grandparents, and caregivers navigating this world of hookups, pornography, and all things online with their children, especially those who've been surprised by a child's unhealthy choices. You are not alone. I see you.

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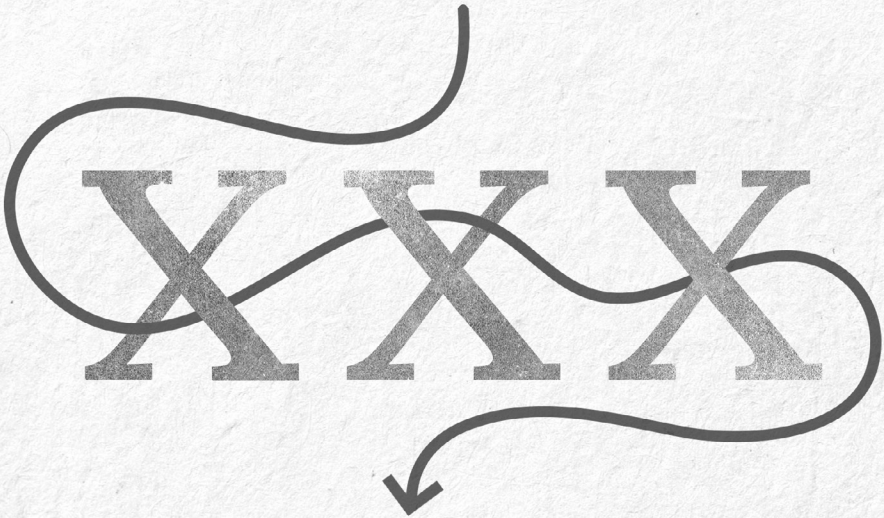
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SECTION 1

**the deterioration
of relationships**





CHAPTER

1

As Long as You're Happy

The world looks for happiness through self-assertion. The Christian knows that joy is found in self-abandonment.
“If a man will let himself be lost for My sake,” Jesus said, “he will find his true self.” —Elisabeth Elliot¹

After a church service, Michelle, a friend nearing retirement, stopped me to chat.

“I haven’t seen Sue in a while. How’s she doing?” she asked about our mutual friend.

“One of Sue’s sons moved in with his girlfriend.”

“Oh, really?” Michelle’s mouth dropped.

I wasn’t sure if she was surprised by the situation itself or because she hadn’t already heard this news. Ignoring Michelle’s reaction, I shared that Sue was heartbroken and still processing her son’s new living arrangements.

Her reply? “Well, as long as he’s happy. That’s all that matters.”

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I blinked. What could I say? It wasn't the time or place to argue biblical principles. Besides, she was only repeating a common comeback. I nodded politely and moved the conversation to a different topic.

We Hold These Truths

Whether the statement is meant as consolation or the sender truly believes it, I hear *as long as you're happy* or some form of this phrase frequently, both inside and outside church walls. I understand this sentiment from someone who doesn't subscribe to God's Word, but this opinion within the Christian community is puzzling.

How have we strayed so far from biblical principles? Even the older generation isn't sad when hearing someone lives outside God's teaching. How did we get to the point that even within church settings we send the message that happiness trumps godliness? And how does this affect the future of the church? More importantly, how does it affect our children's future?

How did we get to the point that even within church settings we send the message that happiness trumps godliness?

Being happy isn't bad. After all, the United States Declaration of Independence says we are all created equal and possess rights our Creator gifted to us, including the right to pursue happiness. From the beginning of the country, Americans have been inspired and encouraged to pursue happiness.

We see it in the media. In the 2006 movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*, based on a true story, the main character is a single dad. He invests his money in a product that doesn't sell well and

finds himself residing on the streets with his son while trying to earn a living. At first, he's unsuccessful, but he eventually meets a businessman who, through a series of events coupled with hard work, propels him into a lucrative career. The movie promotes the idea that anyone can be happy regardless of lineage, upbringing, or status.

But does the constitutional right to pursue happiness equate to seeking it as an end goal? And does the means for obtaining it make a difference?

We can conclude, based on their writings, that our forefathers didn't intend for us to seek self-gratification with no thought of others. Rather, they wanted us to know that our freedoms extend beyond dwelling in a land with no king—we have the freedom to choose a lifestyle that produces our best selves. Our lives don't need to be directed by a monarchy. Instead, we can use our God-given intellect to make personal decisions.

Certainly, God wants us to be happy—to enjoy life. But, as we will explore later, genuine joy comes from him, not from seeking a life of pleasure.

As Long as . . .

The portion of the statement that sends it askew is the qualifier *as long as*. Where are the boundaries in this phrase? Is it okay to eat an entire chocolate cake *as long as I'm happy*? Can I drink until I can't stand up *as long as I'm happy*? What if I quit my job and can't pay my bills *as long as I'm happy*?

What if the statement is turned against me and becomes *as long as they're happy*? Is it okay for my date to flirt with another person in the middle of our outing *as long as he's happy*? Is it okay for a parent to leave a child home alone all night *as long as the*

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parent is happy? Can we treat other humans as objects *as long as we're happy?* Is it acceptable to murder your companion *as long as you're happy?* Where is the line in this type of reasoning? Are there limitations?

The *as long as you're happy* people may now be thinking, "Well, that's taking it a little far." But isn't that how society inched its way to this disposition to begin with? By pushing the line just a little, and then a little more? We've been pushing that line for so long, we don't know where the plumb line is anymore. We don't know where we started or how to get back.

Happiness as an End Goal

What's wrong with being happy? Nothing. But happiness is fleeting. It's based on emotions and circumstances, whereas joy comes from the Lord and is an internal state of being. Pursuing happiness purely for happiness's sake doesn't allow for the tension created by God's refining process when we seek him. It opposes the pursuit of God first and gaining joy as a natural outcome. His Word states, "Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces" (Ps. 34:5 NLT).

Happiness is not universally definable or measurable. Goals should be specific and measurable. Since happiness is subjective, how will we know if we've achieved it? And what if we finally "arrive" at that feeling we've been chasing, and it's yanked away the next moment by something out of our control? We become frustrated and angry.

A focus on happiness minimizes a sense of personal responsibility for poor choices or wrong decisions. It curtails the desire to stick it out and work through the rough times. If a pleasure seeker

isn't happy in a relationship, she moves on. A church friend might even comfort her with the statement, "God must have someone out there who's better for you."

A focus on happiness minimizes a sense of personal responsibility for poor choices or wrong decisions.

This self-gratifying attitude is not fulfilling. While one may experience temporary bliss, it's short-lived and lacks satisfaction and true peace. It doesn't deliver what is promised.

An *as long as you're happy* mentality within the church supports these false messages:

- ▶ **Happiness is more important than being content with God's plans.** We've elevated the pursuit of happiness above God's Word and seeking his will for our lives. If we don't sense abundant glee, we assume we aren't in the right place at the right time. We haven't learned how to patiently listen and wait for his peace to fill us.
- ▶ **If we aren't experiencing happiness, we aren't following God.** We've been conditioned to believe the litmus test for whether we're in God's will is how we feel. But sometimes God allows discomfort to expose insecurities or sinful behaviors, ours or someone else's.
- ▶ **To find our calling, we should ask, "How can I be happy?"** Rather than asking this question, maybe we should ask, "How can I pursue God and his will for my life?" He created us and will point us toward goals generating deep-felt joy. "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4).

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This underlying “chase what brings you pleasure” state of mind has trickled down to millennials and Gen Zers. Many are bold, outspoken, and stand up for themselves—all great qualities. At the same time, constant accessibility to computers and smartphones, coupled with teachings from their predecessors, conditions them to seek whatever brings them immediate bliss. The result is that today’s children and young adults face heavy loads of anxiety, worry, and depression.² Many are lost, insecure, and wishing for something better.

The younger generations are growing up in a world of pornographic images as sex teachers and hookups as goals, with peers and influencers shaping their well-being. Their culture celebrates individuality and, at times, emotionless relationships, if you can call them that. Thankfully, parents are recognizing that their children need help.

Let’s explore this *as long as you’re happy* world they are growing up in, starting with hookup culture.

What Is Hookup Culture?

An increasing number of preteens, teens, college students, and even older singles have an indifferent attitude toward casual sex. It’s becoming an accepted, even celebrated, norm.³

Donna Freitas, a professor and researcher, lists three criteria for a hookup in her article, “A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture.” A hookup is brief, from five minutes to all night; it includes some type of sexual intimacy, anything from just kissing to intercourse; and, most importantly, it takes place with the assumption that there will be no emotional, or otherwise, attachment. When the encounter is over, each person walks away with no expectations. The iffy criterion is alcohol. College students

who take part in hookups are known to drink before and during a hookup party.⁴

In the same article, Freitas distinguishes a hookup from hookup culture. Hookup culture sells the idea that it's normal to have an attitude of ambivalence toward sex and one's partner. The notion that college students, in general, are hooking up and are okay with it is promoted and encouraged within hookup culture.

In order to appear normal, students act as if they approve of hookup culture. They are purposefully vague in their description of a rendezvous, keeping the details mysterious or ambiguous. Whether they only kissed for a few minutes or spent the night together, both women and men can hide behind the word *hookup*. They can brag of participating in hookup culture without exposing themselves as either prudish or promiscuous, thus protecting their reputation and keeping up appearances at the same time.

Individuals engage in these meetups for several reasons. We may assume attraction is the main purpose, but it's actually a desire to fit in, which is a type of peer pressure. Because the culture says hooking up is common, individuals feel obligated to participate just to prove themselves as normal.⁵ But humans are *not* naturally indifferent. Therefore, participants walk away unfulfilled. Students are left feeling empty or desiring an attachment but are reluctant to listen to their inner promptings.

Widespread Acceptance

At first glance, hookup culture seems primarily confined to college campuses. However, if we pay closer attention to our surroundings, we notice mainstream media, including sponsored ads and posts on social media and shows on streaming apps like Netflix, reference hookups frequently. These sexual encounters are purely

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for self-pleasure and come with no intended commitment. While this behavior has a greater reputation within student life, it's also promoted by corporations and individuals via media and advertisements as standard conduct for all singles, regardless of age or lifestyle.

My family and I watched a few episodes of *New Girl*, a television series that first aired in 2011. The show features three men and a woman who share an apartment. From the outset, it's apparent that the primary aim of each character is to hook up with someone, anyone. They even talk about "hooking up" multiple times. Within the first few episodes, the three men living with Jess, the female roommate, encourage her to find a partner for rebound sex after a breakup.⁶ On a separate occasion, one of the guys attends a wedding specifically to locate a hookup buddy.⁷ The characters believe casual sex will solve their problems. Lonely? Hook up. Hurt? Hook up. Mad? Hook up. Then all will be right in the world. Until it isn't. Because, inevitably, whatever problem existed to begin with remains after the sex is over.

Since the series won the Critics' Choice Television Award for Most Exciting New Series in its first season and was still a favorite on Netflix at the time of this book's publication, it's safe to assume people watch and are influenced by its messages.⁸

Evolution of Hookup Culture

Hookup culture did not originate with Netflix, though.

According to researcher Justin Garcia, hookups became more frequent in the 1920s because people began purchasing cars; therefore, youth were able to leave their homes to date. Their parents weren't close in proximity, so they felt freer to explore their sexuality.⁹ This is also the time period when courting morphed to dating

as speakeasies, bars, and movie theaters became common places where young men and women could socialize.¹⁰

The sexual revolution during the 1960s brought the concept that sex doesn't need to be tied to marriage or even a monogamous relationship. It is interesting to note that the pill became available in 1960. This newfound freedom for women meant they didn't need to associate sex with procreation. Women felt empowered and began to express their desire for sexual pleasure. Although some groups blamed oral contraceptives for changes in the United States, the article "The Pill and the Sexual Revolution" on *PBS* explains that historians now think the pill did not actually cause the sexual revolution. Instead, these forces worked together to foster the emerging hookup culture.¹¹

The popularity of television, movies, music, and advertising contributed to the influence of the media on the culture. According to Lisa Wade, author of *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, movies like *Animal House* portrayed college as more than a place to get an academic degree or even find a spouse.¹² College was the place to sow your oats, have fun, and party hard. And this idea stuck.

My Experience in the 1980s

When I began researching hookup culture, I assumed I knew nothing about it. I grew up in the 1980s and figured hooking up was a newer phenomenon. I asked others about their experiences and had an enlightening conversation with a friend in her early thirties. She was sexually active in high school and became a mom at the age of sixteen. The baby's father left, and for a few years after her daughter was born, she continued to seek fulfillment through one-night stands.

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“On the weekends, I dressed up in my cutest clothes and went to parties. We stood around a bonfire and glanced about, hoping to catch someone’s eye. No one wanted to go home by themselves at the end of the night.”

When she mentioned a bonfire, I thought, *Wait a minute. I know this scene. I’ve lived this scene.* Suddenly, I was sixteen again and standing around a bonfire next to a keg, clinging to my red Solo cup filled with beer. I feared being left alone and wished the guy I had a crush on would ask me to “go with him,” the term used for dating.

In high school, my friends and I broke onto the back nine of the golf course at the local country club to hang out and drink. If we found someone old enough to purchase alcohol for us, we drank wine coolers—the cheapest brand available, of course. Otherwise, we were stuck drinking whatever alcoholic beverage someone offered us.

Occasionally, we drove to a classmate’s home in the country, lit a bonfire, and drank around the keg until curfew. The highest form of acceptance, at least in my eyes, was either arriving with a guy or leaving with one. When I rode with a girlfriend, I hoped she wouldn’t abandon me or that my latest infatuation would strike up a conversation, proving he was attracted to me.

At one such party, the big bash kicking off the high school football season, I drank so much I could barely stand. My ride had an earlier curfew than me. Thinking it was better to wait that extra hour to sober up before greeting my parents at the front door, I accepted a new guy friend’s offer to take me home. Along the way, we stopped at his house. I only remember two things about this detour: I knocked something off a shelf in his bathroom while

trying to be as quiet as possible, and it began to snow on the way to my house. The rest of the night is a blur.

I saw him the next day in English class. I had no clue what, if anything, to say to this guy who had driven me home in his fancy car. Had we kissed? Had we gone further than kissing? Did he consider me his girlfriend? In the end, I said nothing. And neither did he.

That night scared me enough to take note of my drinking limitations but didn't stop me from pursuing *the* guy, whoever he might be, who would make me the happiest girl on earth. The party hopping continued, and I had more encounters I'm not proud of.

Through the discussion with my younger friend, I learned that even I grew up in a hookup culture. While I may have been hoping for a long-term relationship, the guys weren't. However, the attitude of the latest generation toward hookups is a ramped-up version, one that exploded with the introduction of smartphones in the first decade of the 2000s.

Now everyone has access to whatever they want whenever they want it, regardless of whether the information is true or false. And there is plenty of false information regarding what makes someone happy and how to find pleasure in a relationship, including the pornography available at our fingertips.

The Online Pornographic World

Pornography has exacerbated the idea that hooking up is normal, natural, and a perfectly acceptable means to satisfaction. What many parents don't understand is that today's pornography is readily available, more graphic and violent than ever, and out to capture the minds of our children. It's nothing like the *Playboy*

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of yesteryear. While my generation had to plan ahead to watch an inappropriate video, today's children stumble onto an image or video clip while innocently scrolling. Young kids who are too young to run a vacuum or cook on the stove search for a word they don't know and become exposed to a whole new world. Advertisements appear on their sidebar as they complete a homework assignment. Curiosity gets the better of them, and they click. One click is all it takes. Just like you and I get lost on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, clicking one video after another, they are off and running, accessing free pornography easily.

Pornography has exacerbated the idea that hooking up is normal, natural, and a perfectly acceptable means to satisfaction.

But children don't just search for it on their own or stumble onto it accidentally. Sometimes, their friends show them. Kids are eager to share their newfound knowledge and freely stick their devices with the offensive material under the innocent eyes of their friends or even acquaintances. I've heard stories from mom friends stating that their six-year-old or seven-year-old was shown photos or videos during sports practices, playdates, or during school. One mom told me that a nine-year-old girl showed her ten-year-old son pornography while both parents were in the same room. Sometimes our young children report these incidents to us because they are shocked by what they see or understand the dangers. But many times, especially if no one has talked with them about pornography, they don't say anything.

Pornography was in our home for years without my knowledge. The day I learned that my fourteen-year-old son watched porn, I was blindsided. I felt a gag reflex at the back of my throat

when I heard him say, "I was watching porn." *What?! How could that be?* I thought I had misheard or that I was living someone else's life. We taught our children biblical principles and the difference between right and wrong. We homeschooled them and took them to church. My husband was a pastor. I thought all those components equated to raising children who knew when to say "no" to worldly pleasures. But I was wrong.

My son was watching pornography when a bogus warning popped up on his screen that threatened him to pay money or the person on the other end would call the police. He was petrified at the thought of being arrested and, out of fear, came to his dad and me in a panic. That day changed my life. I can still visualize my son standing in our yard and revealing this secretive information to us. My eyes were opened to an underground world I didn't know or understand. The shock, pain, hurt, anger, shame, and feeling of loneliness changed the trajectory of my life.

But porn isn't the only negative influence smartphones brought with them. Social media affects what we think of ourselves and how we interact with others. These virtual communities have upped the comparison game and set our emotions on edge. One moment we are riding a high created by extra likes and flattering comments, and the next we are facedown in our pillow reeling from one semi-negative comment said by someone we've never met. And whatever emotional roller coaster we are riding, our children are on one going four times as fast with steeper hills and more curves, twists, and turns.

Whatever emotional roller coaster we are riding, our children are on one going four times as fast with steeper hills and more curves, twists, and turns.

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Devices granting access to anyone at any time ushered in a new way of introducing yourself to a potential partner. Whether searching for a long-term relationship or a quick fix to a sexual need, sending a nude, or sexting, is now equivalent to saying hello. Per Camille Mori, Jessica E. Cooke, and others in “The Prevalence of Sexting Behaviors among Emerging Adults: A Meta-Analysis,” not only is consensual sexting an emerging behavior, but so is nonconsensual sexting.¹³

I was at a small group with some church friends and was explaining how middle schoolers send nudes on a regular basis when one of the ladies shared her experience. “Before my husband and I got married a few years ago, I was on several Christian single dating sites. Men sent me unsolicited photos of their penises all the time.” This is a grown woman with adult children who was receiving photos of what used to be private parts.

Another friend, a single lady in her thirties, chimed in. “Yep. I’ve been on those sites. Happened to me, too.”

All I could think was, *Ew. Who wants to see that?*

The 2020 pandemic and lockdown intensified this hookup culture and pornographic atmosphere. What already existed worsened. With children and adults alike spending an unprecedented amount of time staring at screens all day, it was the perfect storm for the pornography industry and predators to capture the attention of more consumers. Thankfully, the pandemic also brought attention to what most hadn’t known or had ignored—pornography and groomers for human trafficking are in our neighborhoods. And we began discussing it.

I work part-time with a nonprofit and go to local schools to talk with middle schoolers and high schoolers about making healthy choices. Recently, I was talking with eighth graders about

avoiding risky behaviors, and I mentioned the dangers of sending and receiving nudes. After class, one of the girls came up to me. "Some old man sent me a pic of his private stuff. It was gross, so I reposted it for my friends to see." She laughed. She didn't find it odd, nor did she understand that even two decades ago, this type of behavior would be shocking and shunned.

She and her classmates, as well as most middle schoolers, are under the impression that these actions are ordinary and acceptable. If another student, especially one a preteen or teen is attracted to, asks for a nude, she sends it. Even those who hesitate for moral reasons sometimes give in because of peer pressure. While teaching, I'm quick to point out that sending and receiving nudes at their age is possession of and distribution of child sexual abuse material (also known as child pornography).¹⁴ It also opens doors to sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, sextortion, and revenge porn.

While my adult friend could dismiss an unsolicited nude as obnoxious and vulgar, an eighth grader can't use the same logic to distinguish right from wrong, especially since she has no other frame of reference. This is a major problem with hookup culture, a porn-saturated world, and noses in screens all day. Many who belong to younger generations can't discern healthy from unhealthy, positive from negative, godly from ungodly because they don't have files stored in their brains to analyze scenarios against. And as they continue to make poor choices, their physical brains are altered.

Brain Development

I opened my car door, slipped into the seat, fastened my seatbelt, and started the ignition. I pulled out of the driveway and drove

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two miles. My car turned left, and suddenly, I was sitting in the church parking lot. That's when I realized I couldn't remember how I got there.

Has this happened to you? You've repeated a task for so long and so often, you no longer need to think through the steps. They're automatic. And, at times, you wonder how you accomplished the deed that has become so mindless it no longer requires concentration. These mechanical practices, born from repetitive behavior, are a marvel.

The area of brain science is growing and receiving a lot of attention. What we've learned is our brains form grooves, or neurological pathways, based on our decisions. Each time we make the same choice, the groove deepens. The deeper the groove, the more difficult it is to modify. These grooves are helpful when the involuntary habit we've formed is positive, like learning the steps to driving a car. But not all routine responses are constructive.

Our children's brains are particularly vulnerable because they are still developing. A brain is not fully mature until the midtwenties. Until then, the pleasure-seeking part, the amygdala, is in battle with the logical part, the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex, the portion of the brain responsible for planning ahead and understanding cause and effect, is the last to develop. Therefore, teens depend on their amygdala and are susceptible to instinctual decisions that lead to risky behaviors.

The portion we adhere to affects future outcomes. If a decision is based on the intelligent, logical, sensible section of the brain, the same choice becomes easier in the future. However, if we cave into the pleasure-seeking, irrational part and make choices solely based on instant gratification, those same choices become easier and easier until they're automatic.

Furthermore, the dopamine hit our brain receives after pleasurable behaviors produces a desire for more of those rewarding deeds. And when those same actions no longer satisfy our cravings, we want more and more. This is why we see dangerous challenges on TikTok or Instagram go viral. Our brain craves the dopamine hit caused by more likes, shares, and comments. The rational portion of our brain may be saying, *This is too dangerous. It's not worth the time and effort.* But we don't listen because we are gliding down those deep grooves created by memories of the neurochemical reward boost our body receives when we experience unending scrolling, likes, shares, etc.

As certain behaviors continue, the status quo is less satisfying. Therefore, cravings may intensify. What could have quenched a desire one day leaves the brain seeking more the next. This explains why a one-night stand is less satisfying than it used to be and why porn users may require more usage at more violent levels to feel gratified.

The good news is that the brain is neuroplastic, which means it's pliable. The brain can form new pathways and heal itself, even as an adult. Still, a teen's brain is more impressionable and prone to forming long-term addictions because the prefrontal cortex is developing. The pathways formed through habitual decisions as a teen are not as easy to overcome.

In the Bible, we find this thought in the middle of the "love chapter": "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me" (1 Cor. 13:11). We will explore the full passage later in the book, but I find it fascinating that while talking about love and exploring its many facets, God inserts information about our intellect. Scripture confirms that our mental ability to

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think logically and make rational decisions should improve as we grow up. But if that reasoning is stifled or stunted based on faulty information or lack of self-control, the brain will not function properly as an adult.

We want to turn the flawed reasoning around in our minds and in those of our children. This hookup culture, this society that says watching pornography is acceptable and having more friends on social media is our objective, seen through an *as long as you're happy* lens, is destroying relationships.

If we persist in holding up the pursuit of happiness and continue to tout the *as long as you're happy* mentality as the end-all fix to everything wrong, relationships will continue to deteriorate, including relationships with friends, coworkers, spouses, children, and God.

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Our approach needs adjusted. Our perspective needs shifted.

Maybe we're setting our sights too low. We are shortchanging ourselves by desiring mere happiness. We're looking to purchase a three-bedroom home in a cute neighborhood when God wants to hand us a mansion on the beach. Let's change our target and aspire to experience the deeper, richer satisfaction and contentment that accompanies the joy found only in God. This joy is fulfilling and long-lasting. Rather than aiming for a short-lived emotion, our goals should revolve around pursuing God and his righteousness. When we lean into him, we have joy and experience happiness.

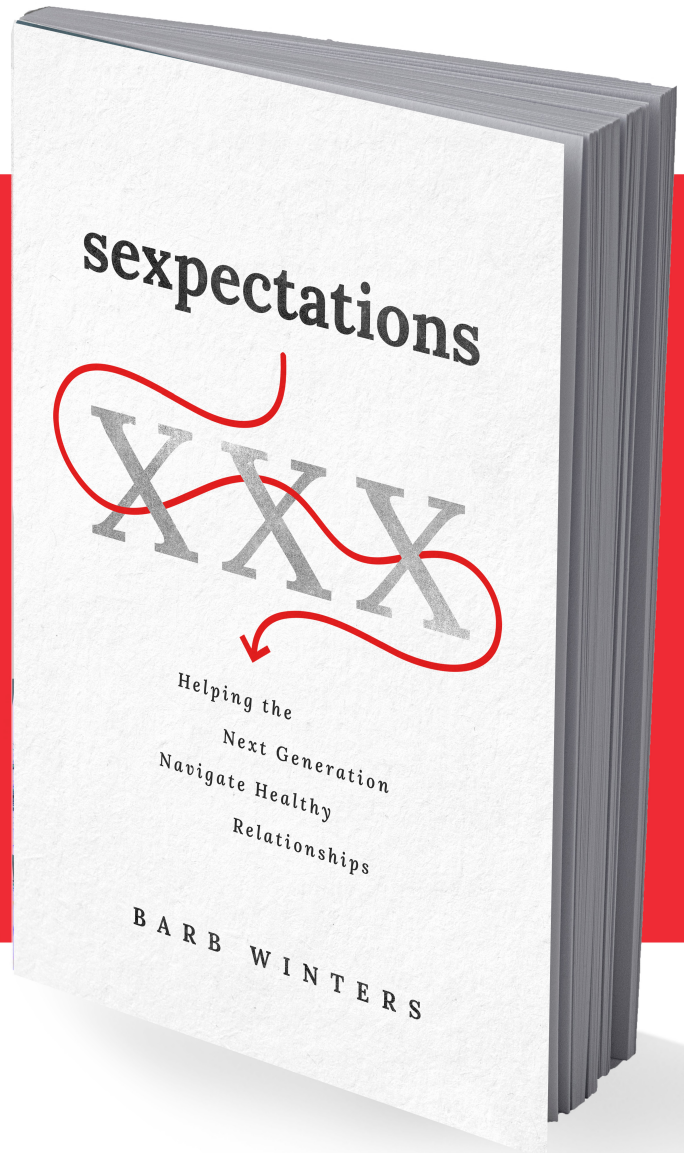
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