



# Students and Porn

A Life-Giving Conversation  
with Morgan Schmidt

*Author of **Woo: Awakening Teenagers' Desire to Follow in the Way of Jesus***

by SETH TAYLOR



**When I became a dad,** I remember actually having the clichéd thought at one point: “Is there a manual for this?” What’s funny about that question is that there are! There are literally zillions of books that have been written to tell me how to do parenting. But the reason that parenting is still possibly the most difficult job on the planet, despite the best efforts of people like my wife who is a mental health specialist for children, is that before I had kids, no one had written a manual on how / work.

When it comes to how your kids develop, your parenting skills are only a piece of the puzzle – it’s much more about how *you* work and how your children will bring out the deep wounds and struggles you carry with you in your life.

So in approaching the question of teenagers and porn, we have to learn about how our teens work, but more importantly we have to dive deeply into what unconscious baggage we carry that, without knowing it, we are likely to pass on to our kids. This issue is going to trigger whatever pain we have lying underneath our own sexuality. If it is approached honestly and openly, it is going to change us for the better – as parents and people.

### ***To Woo: to love in a way so as to invite the object of that love to come to you by an act of their own will.***

I met Morgan Schmidt when I started attending The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology. She was in the final stages of receiving her Masters in Divinity, but she was already working full time as a youth pastor at a local church.

She would make a comment on something that the prof was lecturing about and I would sit in awe and think something like, “Whoa.....I have never thought about it like that.” So, I pursued a friendship and have gleaned a great deal of wisdom as a result, especially when it pertains to how our theological and spiritual perspectives interact with the mysterious world of the exotic animal known as the Teenager.

Morgan and I got together not too long ago to talk about this issue and what we discussed can be summed up in 5 major points. We sat back in her office with some good coffee on a rainy day in Seattle at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church. And the conversation began with one of the more debated and contemplated theological questions in history: are these kids inherently evil and corrupt or are they inherently good and true?

## **Principle #1 – Your teens are NOT inherently bad. They are carriers of the Image of God**

**ST:** You see that is the key issue, right?

**MS:** Absolutely – that's where I start. Not only are these kids good, but that they come with a story that has brought them to this place where they are now. They have all of these stories about their first encounters with their bodies and with sexual attraction – they are a bundle of stories and it is my job to respond with curiosity. The fact that they are coming to you in the first place says that there is something in them that they know that they don't want to live in a self-destructive way.

**ST:** You see this as a fundamental true reading of the Creation story. Why?

**MS:** It's mainly as I study God's response to people in scripture, especially there in the garden in Genesis. I truly believe that people are inherently good. That goodness doesn't vanish because of the fall. The real issue is that at the fall is where we see the first real temptation: to doubt that you are created in the image of God. For me, starting with the theory that we are inherently sinful – there's just no hope there. I think if we start there, we're giving Satan a little too much credit. I mean, God's response in the garden doesn't speak to a God that is angry because all of mankind has become sinful, but rather a heartbroken grief that his creation has lost sight of who they are. The question is "Who told you this lie?" And what I see in these kids is the Imago Dei - the image of God. So, I constantly want kids to feel affirmed that what I see is really who they are and that it is GOOD and thus their desires are good, and so they don't have to be afraid of sex. This way, they can find healthy ways of engaging with their sexuality, rather than trying to satisfy their desires in disordered or unhealthy ways.

**ST:** I get that. I was raised with this theology of inherent depravity and the weird thing is that even though I was constantly told at church and home that if I just believed the right thing, I would be happy and see paradise and all of these things, but as a kid...

**MS:** You were thinking, "What if I don't?"

**ST:** YES!!! Kids see the shadow, always. You tell them that if they believe this and do the right thing, that God will approve of them and they will be "saved", they feel that cold shadow on the other side of that statement – if I don't, I'm dead, right?

**MS:** Yes. Especially when some of what is being asked of them stands so opposed to their desires.

**ST:** So by the time they hit the teen years, many of them have internalized that anxiety and so they are driven by this nameless fear that they're not okay and that God is angry with them or disapproving of them and their desires.

**MS:** Exactly. And many of them internalize the idea that, "If I'm already bad, then what's the point?" It's a terrible place to start.

## **Principle #2 – Kids must understand that their desires are good**

**ST:** Speaking of desire, you have a chapter in your book on a “Theology of Desire”, which I have been thinking about a lot lately. It seems to me that the core of this problem, built on top of that idea that these kids are bad at the core, is this incessant suppression of their desires. We don’t seem to know how to deal with what they want to do with their bodies or lives, other than to tell them, “DON’T DO IT!”

**MS:** We have to remember that when kids first get exposed to porn and sexualized culture, average age 11 years old, they have this Crayola 8-pack of emotions to work with, but as they develop and grow through their teen years, they gain that full 64 pack of emotions and they haven’t really learned how to color with all those shades yet. I mean, they used to be like, “I used to be sad or angry, and now it’s just a complicated mess!” So, how a parent responds is HUGE – and it’s a huge responsibility. What if an adult could sit down with them and know that and guide them through that?

**ST:** And we’re too caught up in our anxiety making sure that our kids understand the difference between “purity” and “sin”.

**MS:** Yeah. And the word “sin” just has too much attached to it. I use the word “brokenness” because it helps kids understand that they are a part of this broken world where darkness does exist, but that it doesn’t define them. Kids understand that because they feel that way. We all feel broken at some level – but when we try to assimilate the concept that we are “bad”, we just feel shame. It’s so opposed to grace and love.

**ST:** So you believe that the answer is to tell them that their desires are good. And you don’t see that as handing them a “license to have sex”?

## **Principle #3 – Have 100 one-minute conversations about sex with your child**

**MS:** That all depends on the prep work that’s been done. My friend Tina Schermer Sellers talks about how most parents have one 100-minute conversation with their kid and this makes for an awkward situation where the kid doesn’t know what to expect or how to articulate their experience with sex or porn. Tina proposes that parents, starting at a young age, make it a goal to have 100 one-minute conversations instead. That can start as soon as children are curious about their bodies. As they get older, parents can respond as things come up and have a “posture”, (and that’s a key word), that invites conversation that doesn’t make their bodies weird or sex repulsive. It helps a child anticipate the things that they will encounter. And it creates situations where conversations can happen, like those awkward moments when everyone’s watching the movie and the sex scene comes. So many times, our kids don’t have a framework for things because they’ve never been exposed to it. Probably those conversations go better if they’ve been happening over time. But even if they haven’t, you can still respond. It will feel awkward, but even students that I have known that feel really far and disconnected from their parents can usually recognize the sacred space that gets created when both

parties are willing to risk that vulnerability together. And I think parents know best, hopefully, how to connect to their kid.

**ST:** And maybe the parents need to have some willingness to look at their own pain and how their children trigger those things?

**MS:** – Yes, and is your posture going to be one of fear or of love and possibility. It's really important that parents understand that they don't have to have a PhD in their own crap. None of us have it all figured out and have all of the answers or know all of the technical terms for the anatomy. What I hope for parents is that the posture they adopt is one of love and acceptance so that we can give their kids some choice in their lives.

**ST:** What do you think those conversations should look like? What should parents say to their kids?

**MS:** I think the main goal with their language should be to help kids learn how to articulate their own thoughts and feelings surrounding sexuality. If a kid asks a question, a great way to start is by responding with a question: "Hmmm....what do you think about that?" You'll find that kids will reveal where they hold fear and shame or even hope and a paradigm of a God that is angry with them or a God that loves them. But like I said, every parent hopefully knows how best to connect to his or her child and allow space for them in that way.

**Principle #4 – No church or school or outside influence can come close to the level of influence a parent has over their child's perspective of sex and porn.**

**ST:** I think one of my main questions in this arena has been akin to, "What is the church's responsibility in shaping this conversation?" In the life of a teen, I could ask the same regarding schools and other extra-curricular activities and organizations. What are your thoughts on that?

**MS:** Yeah – that's a tough one. The thing is, I see the average kid maybe 60 hours a year. The constant contact parents have with their kids is by far the largest influence on them. I don't think parents are doing it wrong or sinful or needing to feel ashamed, but our culture lends to this brokenness of outsourcing nuanced skill sets so that parents don't have to. They don't have to throw the ball with their kids because they're going to send their kid to practice with a coach. They don't have to talk about Jesus because they're going to send their kids to church. And the church becomes a catch all for parents for "make my kid a better human" – and I guess that speaks well toward how we form as holistic human beings, but I would much rather see myself as a partner with parents toward forming the spiritual health of these kids. I want to be a team pointing toward the goal of seeing these kids happy and healthy and more connected to themselves, God, and others. Many parents want to wash their hands of some of the difficult aspects of their kids lives because it can be terrifying.

**ST:** Do you guys talk about sex in your youth group?

**MS:** Yes, on occasion.

**ST:** And you bless all the raging hormones as a God given desire that should be honored?

**MS:** Yes – and I focus the conversation on the goodness of the desires, trusting that when kids feel safe, that the right conversations will happen. I'll talk to them sometimes and simply say, "Sex is awesome. That's why it is such a big deal. And there are ways for it to be more awesome and there are also ways for it to break your hearts and break your body and break your soul." Those are the conversations we tend to have as opposed to "yes or no" conversations. It's not fair to kids to have simple yes or no conversations. It leaves them hanging with no way of understanding how they connect to themselves, to God, and to the world.

**Principle #5 – Be prepared to confront your own pain and trust that if you do, the Spirit will guide the life of your family**

**ST:** I agree. I am watching my little girl, at age 2, already developing her sexuality and I wonder sometimes how we ever missed it and turned it into such a scary and awkward thing? Maybe trying to answer that question will land me in a library somewhere studying Augustine, but I think about her growth as a woman and I want more than anything that she would not live in fear of her desires. But that takes some serious trust – and it forces me to deal with my junk. I get knots in my stomach when I think about that and I have to ask myself the difficult question of, "What's that all about?"

**MS:** Yeah – it's the "what's the worst that can happen?" conversation. Really, in terms of having the 100 one minute conversations, what's the worst that can happen? I think a lot of parents view the primary goal of youth ministry to be, "Keep my kid happy. Keep my kid safe. And please, dear God, don't let them have sex before they get married." And we sell ourselves short because of that fear. This is compared to the life we find in community, in asking hard questions together about what's happening to us in the world, and in becoming more and more the men and women God created us to be – compared to 'just say no.' There's no comparison to the life that can be found when things are open and guided by love. Not that this is "license to have sex" – because I think when you do that in a community where kids feel safe and where they really feel they can show up – the more whole they feel, the less likely they are to feel so depressed and lonely and far away from themselves that they seek out these destructive behaviors that continue to break them. And that's the point of what we do.

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What Morgan primarily speaks to in her book is that most of the way we deal with teens is driven by our fears. Our love for our children triggers the deepest and darkest parts of us – all the crevices and cracks where the shadows linger inside. Our kids show us where we

need to be healed the most. And the issue of how to have these “awkward” conversations lies inside the question of why we see these conversations as awkward in the first place. Like Dr. Dan Allender said, we’re terrified at some level, of our kids.

Morgan’s answer is a type of love summed up in her book title: the age-old art of wooing someone. This idea, “to woo,” is usually reserved for romantic arenas, but if you think about it, this is the God we have all come to desire: a God so in love with us that He looks past all of the brokenness and sees the light inside of us all and then invites us to fully experience that light. I believe that this is the God testified to in the Scriptures. This is the Imago Dei and it dwells in each of our kids. It dwells in their raging hormones and funny insecurities and also in their sexual desires.

The porn industry targets kids in a unique and powerful way because they seem to know intuitively that most of these kids have not been having those 100 one-minute conversations with their parents. They know that when that kid stumbles across that image or video at a friend’s sleep over that they won’t be ready for it. They won’t have a frame of reference for it. They won’t know what to do or who to talk to about what they experience in their bodies when this occurs. What if your child was the kid who felt so safe that when you picked them up from the party, the first thing they did was open up to you about it? And how could your kid then be a part of the change in this conversation in our culture?

As parents, we should put twice as much time, money, and energy into creating space for these conversations with our kids as we do trying to protect them from exposure. I am not saying that it’s not helpful to put some software on their phone or have a filter on your home computer – but I am saying that they are going to be exposed to porn. It is going to happen, no matter how hard you try to stop it.

What if they were ready for it when it happened? What if you were too? In this scenario, truth wins out and light is shed in the darkness.



## Seth Taylor

The author of *Feels Like Redemption: The Pilgrimage to Health and Healing*, Seth is a dynamic new voice in the world of theological thought, addressing difficult topics such as belief, philosophy, mysticism and the roots of addiction. He holds a M.A. in Theology and Culture from the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology in Seattle, Washington, where he lives with his wife and two children.



## Morgan Schmidt

Morgan Schmidt is the author of *Woo: Awakening Teenagers Desire to Follow in the Way of Jesus*. She is the Youth Pastor at Bend Presbyterian in Bend, OR and the founder and director of Youth Collective, a collaborative student ministry initiative. She is passionate about cultivating teenagers' desires to be whole people who help make earth more like heaven. Morgan received her Masters of Divinity from The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. She loves living in Bend with her husband, Ian, and golden retriever, Buddy.

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