

How To Talk To Your Kids About Sex

It may be the most important talk you will ever have with your child! The “big talk” about sex should come early (we recommend the eighth birthday), but it is never too late! A “preemptive strike” can give your child a healthy, positive, respectful view of human intimacy that will stand up to all the garbage that will come from the media and the peer group. And being able to talk together about THE MOST intimate subject will make any and every other subject “on limits” between you and you child.

But all parents need help with this subject! We tend to avoid it and delay it and feel embarrassed and hesitant about it. Well ... help is on the way! What follows has been used successfully by thousands of parents who have had truly beautiful and memorable talks. (The first “big talk” and important follow-up ones) with their kids. This “open” part of valuesparenting.com will give you the basics, and if you want and need more (including an actual dialogue to use with your child), you can find it in the members section.

Our discussions with parents around the world, ranging from individual one-on-one conversations to question-and-answer sessions in large lecture halls, have convinced us that parents want and need practical, usable help. They want to know how to talk to their kids about sex in a positive, pragmatic way, and they want reassurance that their voice and their influence can outweigh that of the media and the peer group.

That’s what we’ve tried to provide in here, with the suggestion that the centerpiece be the “big talk” that we suggest for age eight. (It’s best to start early ... yet it’s never too late, and there are suggestions for adapting it for older kids.) This pivotal discussion should be preceded by preparatory dialogues and followed by discussions designed to continue all through adolescence, each adaptable to your situation, your personality, and the age of your child.

Our theory is that the best (and most effective) reason for sexual restraint and responsibility is that it increases one’s chances for a successful and lasting long-term commitment and for a safe and happy family. A child with this goal, this hope, this vision will make better decisions in every area of his or her life. The adjectives “beautiful” and “awesome” are used repeatedly to symbolize this positive approach. The single greatest protection for kids (and the strongest motivation for avoiding early, dangerous sex) is to grow up thinking of sex as a wonderful, spectacular miracle that not only makes babies but also can bind couples and families together in a loyal, happy way. The words “beautiful and awesome” will come to represent this to your child.

There five recurrent themes in this approach:

1. *Preemptive Information*: No realistic parent believes he or she can be the only source of sexual information to a child. The media, the peer group, and the school will all play large (and mixed) roles. But parents with the right message and the right timing can preempt negative and harmful information. They can also create a positive frame of reference and an effective filter through which kids can interpret and internalize what is useful and helpful to them, and screen out or set aside what is harmful or dangerous.

2. *Family*: The hope (and the goal) of all parents is to maximize the happiness and well-being of their children and help those children to one day have happy families of their own. Sex is always approached in this book as a matter of family. The ultimate danger of the misuse of sex is the destruction of family, and the best use of sex is to strengthen the family.

3. *Correct Principles*: The most important principles that parents can convey to their children are pointedly and practically taught as families talk about sex. Open communication, delayed gratification, and the effective implementation of goals and plans are only a few of the principles that parents can teach along with and as part of a positive approach to marriage and sex.

4. *Realism*: Some characterize anything other than giving in to casual, experimental sex as “unrealistic.” But the best definition of “realistic” is being aware of what is really going on and acting accordingly.

A great description of “what is really going on” was presented by Leonard Pitt in a Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service article:

The world we have made is harshly different [from] the one we once knew. This culture didn't develop from that one, it mutated. These are rawer, cruder, colder times, and sexual promiscuity has become a knife's edge of danger that would have stunned us. Sex has flooded our children.

In this reality, there is only one realistic course to take: to do all we can to protect our children and prevent them from getting into the current naive and dangerous promiscuity that can harm them in so many ways.

A Focus on the Personal: Because of the personal nature of the subject matter, we have tried to write this approach in a very personal way. Our challenge to you is to read these ideas as personally as they were written. Apply it to your own children and to your own life.

Questions and Answers

We conclude most of the lectures and seminars we give on speaking to kids about sex with a question-and-answer period. The following are the most common questions parents have and some of the answers we offer.

Question: Why is it so hard to talk to your own kids about sex (so hard that a shocking number of parents never do it)?

Answer: There are three reasons: the embarrassment we recall about the subject and our own conscious and subconscious inhibitions, our lack of a plan or an agenda or a clear idea of what we ought to say and how we ought to say it, and our own ambiguity about what we ourselves believe about sex and what we want our children to believe.

Question: Even with help – proven methods, dialogues, and so forth – can a parent compete with media and peers as a major influence in how kids think about sex?

Answer: Yes! A parent who starts early and knows what he or she is doing can be the dominant influence, superseding and overwhelming all other voices.

Question: Does talking with my child about sex have to be uncomfortable and embarrassing for both of us?

Answer: No! Quite the contrary. If you do it the right time and in the right way, it can be enjoyable and natural – and can build a powerful and deep emotional bond between you and your child that facilitates other kinds of communication and trust.

Question: Is it harder for a single parent to talk to kids about sex?

Answer: Yes and no. It may be harder in the sense that you're on your own, without a spouse to support you or to do part of the discussing or to help sort out how to approach it, but the objective and principles are the same. In a way it is easier because you're the only one doing it. You have control and consistency in what you say and in how and when you say it. A lot of single parents, because they're on their own, take their responsibility more seriously and actually do a better job. (Although the plural, *parents*, is often used in this program, be assured that everything herein is equally applicable and equally intended for single parents.)

Question: What is the most important thing when talking to kids about sex?

Answer: The single most important thing is to make it a positive, exciting, joyful subject and to link the subject to marriage and family and to love and commitment in a clear and positive way.

Question: Is eight really the best age for the “big talk?” Some would say it’s too early, some would say too late.

Answer: It is important to have your main discussion (and your pre- and follow-up discussion) early enough that they form your child’s initial attitudes toward sex and serve as a deflector of all the “silliness,” “dirtiness,” and nonsense that children hear from friends, peers, and media. But having it too early raises issues that kids aren’t ready for .

Question: Is the objective here to protect my child, to make her aware of the physical and emotional dangers of sex?

Answer: Yes and no. We do need to protect our children, but it is an awareness of the beautiful power and positive commitment in the right kind of sex that gives children the best motivation and capacity to avoid what could hurt them and others.

Question: As a parent, is it unusual for me to hope my child approaches sex more carefully and more conservatively than I did? Am I a hypocrite if I try to teach my child to abstain in ways I did not?

Answer: It is very common for parents to wish their children would wait for real commitment (because of physical safety, emotional safety, moral beliefs, hopes of a better marriage – and a host of other reasons). Most parents’ views are surprisingly conservative when it comes to what they wish for and think is best for their children. And it is not hypocritical to teach something you have not always lived, especially if you truly feel it is what is best for today. Good parenting means wanting something better for one’s children.

Question: But is it realistic to hope for (and work for) less sexual activity before commitment and marriage?

Answer: The facts indicate that it is. More and more respected thinkers are concluding that this form of “delayed gratification” is smarter as well as safer. And things are changing: Kids in age groups who didn’t want to admit they were virgins five years ago now feel pride in the fact. But these are individual decisions, and the overwhelming reality is that parents need to decide what course is best for their children and then take concrete, positive steps to improve their children’s chances of taking that course.

Question: But can I decide what is best for my child, or does he have the right to grow up and decide for himself?

Answer: Let us repeat the metaphor from our book *Teaching Your Children Values*: “Expecting a young child to discover what is right for him is like putting him in a small boat, in the current, without a paddle, heading for Niagara Falls.” Of course a child will eventually decide for himself, but *not* to teach him what our experience (and our heart) tells us is best is the most serious form of parental abdication of responsibility.

Question: But what if I’m not sure what is best?

Answer: One of the most demanding (and most beneficial) parts of parenting is sorting out what we believe, so we can teach those beliefs with honesty to our children. No one can do that for you, but this program may help.

Question: How much does the media's portrayal of sex influence our children? Does casual, irresponsible, or indifferent sex in the media harm us as much as casual, irresponsible, or indifferent violence in media?

Answer: Media sex is actually a bigger danger than media violence. A tiny percentage of kids copy or reenact the violence they see, but countless thousands imitate the irresponsible, uncommitted, casual sex that they see nearly every time they turn on the TV or go to a movie. Perhaps if kids carried Uzi machine guns around with them, they would imitate more of the violence they see. They do carry their sexuality around with them, so the potential for imitation is truly frightening. The directly related societal costs of teen pregnancy, abortion, disease, and depression that result make teenage sexual activity the biggest social problem facing America today and make irresponsible media sex a huge culprit.

Question: What if my child is already sexually active?

Answer: *Don't give up!* It's never too late to make the subject of sex more open and more positive between you and your child. *Don't give in!* If you believe that waiting for real love and commitment is best, is *right*, then don't give in to the status quo. There is a whole movement in this country about "regaining virginity," about deciding to wait for marriage. *Don't give out!* Don't get too tired to try. Don't ever abdicate this part of your parental responsibility. Adapt the discussions suggested in here. Make particular use of the section entitled "Starting Over." Stay positive. Let the child know that you love him unconditionally but are concerned about the things he is doing. Be specific. Help him sort it out.

Timing

The timing is a matter of balance – not telling children too much, too early, before they're interested or ready to understand, but not waiting until they know too much from negative, incomplete, wrong sources. We feel that the peak of a child's readiness is at age eight, when he or she is very verbal and conceptual and is flattered by responsibility and by being treated as a "grown up." This age is like a marvelous window. Kids are old enough to understand but not old enough to be cynical. They are old enough to have real interest and fascination but not old enough to be embarrassed or closed off or to have a lot of preconceptions. Before the big talk, you should hold some preliminary discussions to prepare the way. And after the big talk there are a number of related subjects that need to be discussed in more detail. Then, as your child enters and experiences adolescence, the focus shifts from facts to behavior, from *knowing* what he should to *doing* what he should, and to acting with restraint and responsibility.

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(If your child is between eight and twelve, the “big talk” suggested here is still workable and appropriate but will have to be modified so it doesn’t sound as if you’re “talking down” to your child and to allow for a child who knows more and probably has more questions.)

Phase I Preliminary “As Needed” Talks with Three to Eight Year Olds

Answering questions Without Going Beyond Them

A mother told us a funny (but point-making) story. Her five-year-old son came up to her one evening at home and said, “Mom, where did I come from?” She thought of trying to detour or escape the question somehow, but there was no ready excuse. The two of them were alone at home that night, and she figured that if her son was asking, she’d better summon up her courage and tell him.

They sat down in the living room, and the mother launched into it, not too smoothly and feeling a little embarrassed, but giving it her best shot. The little boy’s eyes got wider and wider as he listened without a word, just nodding his head slightly whenever his mother said, “Do you understand that?” And shaking his head slowly whenever she said, “Did you know that?” When she was finished, she said, “Does that answer your question?”

The little fellow squirmed around and said, “Well ... I just meant ... you know ... where did we come from? Like before we moved here last year. I forgot the name of our other town.”

While usually not as dramatic as in this story, it is easy to tell very young children too much. The best policy, until they are seven or eight, is just to respond to their questions, their *real* questions, with simple answers, always deferring detail to later and using the interchange as a way to build a positive anticipation for when they turn eight.

So if a five year old says, “Where do babies come from?” say, “Sometimes when a mommy and daddy love each other, it helps make a baby.” If he says, “But *how?*” say, “It’s like a miracle, a wonderful, unbelievable magic. When you’re eight, we’ll tell you about it.”

Appreciation for Bodies

A healthy attitude about sex starts with how a child feels about his own body. At a very young age children become aware of their bodies and what they can do.

We've seen how older preschoolers continued to find awe and wonder in their bodies while observing thousands of kids go through our Joy Schools.

In dealing with young children, every available opportunity should be taken to point out how lucky we are to be able to see the beauties of the season, to hear creative and inspirational music, to taste different and unique combinations of food (a couple of our children would not call this a joy), to touch a baby's cheek or a kitten's soft fur, and especially to feel the love that we have for the others in our family. The list of things to point out and be grateful for is endless. The more a child can appreciate his own body as a preschooler, the better foundation he will have for feeling positive about the greatest of all physical miracles.

Family Commitments, Loyalty, and Love

What do commitment, love, and loyalty have to do with talking to your children about sex? Everything! Whether you are reading this as a loyal, committed, loving spouse and parent who was also lucky enough to grow up in a close family, or as a single parent who has had no role modeling for these qualities now or in childhood, you *can* talk to your kids about them. Whether your model is something you've experienced or something you've wished for, you can share your feelings with your children. If you have always been exposed to loyalty, love, and commitment, tell your child about it. Share some of the childhood experiences you can remember about how your parents showed their love for each other and express how much you love your spouse, their other parent. Add stories of family loyalty – cheering at your brother's games even though you were a little jealous that he got all the attention, your dad showing up at your birthday party even though it was difficult for him, the love you felt from your parents as they tucked you in bed and praised you for a job well done. Kids love to hear stories about you as a child with their grandparents as parents.

If you grew up in difficult circumstances or have been hurt by unfaithfulness or family disloyalty, tell your children a little about it and reassure them of your commitment to never let it happen in your own family. At bedtime or some other appropriate setting say something like: "I think one of the most important things in a family is to know that we love each other. I will always love you, and you will always be the most important thing in my life. No matter how hard life gets outside these walls, you need to know that our family will always be here for you. It wasn't always that way for me."

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Note: For those wanting more detail, actual dialogue to use with younger (3-8) children on “Awe and Wonder in Nature,” “Modesty in Dress and Appearance,” and “Respecting and Protecting Our Bodies” appears in the member section along with a “fable” bedtime story designed to prepare young children for “The Big Talk.”

Phase II: “The Big Talk” (suggested for age 8)

Preparation

Age eight is a “window” between the disinterest of very young childhood and the moodiness and unpredictability of pre-puberty. (Again, if your child is over eight but under twelve, go forward boldly with this talk, but modify appropriately.) Most eight year olds are trusting, open, innocent, anxious to please, and fairly fascinated by the world around them. They simply haven’t yet learned to be embarrassed, sarcastic, or cynical.

Depending on where they live, some kids have heard quite a bit about sex by the time they’re eight; others have heard next to nothing. Still others have heard quite a lot but paid no attention to it. Regardless of how much they have or haven’t heard, whatever is on their slate is written pretty lightly and can be erased or rewritten or corrected by a prepared, committed parent. (Note, however, that these ideas are not written for parents who have to deal with an abuse problem. Such situations usually require counseling and professional medical expertise.)

One of the greatest things about most seven and eight year olds is their susceptibility to anticipation and excitement. Because of this it is possible to really pump them up, to build a positive and happy level of enthusiasm leading up to the “big talk.”

Unless you have compelling reasons for starting earlier or unless your child is already older than eight, we suggest that you target and plan for the day or week of the eighth birthday for the “big talk.” Pegging it to a birthday can help build the desired kind of positive, excited anticipation. (It also gives you a deadline so you won’t put it off.) If your child is a little older than eight, pick or designate some other special day that is at least a few weeks in the future.

Planning

As the birthday draws close, let your child choose a special place to spend the evening “exclusively” – just the child and you (both parents if married). This is a time separate and apart from the birthday party, which you might want to

hold earlier in the day. The evening is just for the two or three of you and is devoted to “the most beautiful and awesome thing in the world.”

Help the child choose a quiet, conversation-friendly place like a nice restaurant with a private booth or perhaps place in the country where you could take a nice drive in the car. At home by the fire or on a cozy sofa is fine, too, as long as you can have privacy and not be interrupted. If the child prefers an activity of some kind, do it early enough that you can still have the evening open for the “big talk.”

Well before the special day arrives, make a visit to the library or bookstore and pick out the picture book you will use as an aid in your discussion. Many are available under categories such as “maturation” and “child sex education.” Have the librarian or bookstore salesperson help you. You will likely find at least half a dozen to choose from, but it’s best to choose one book rather than two or three. Our personal favorite is *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle. An alternative is *How Babies Are Made* by Andrew Audrey and Stephen Schep. Both of these are candid and clear and have a nice tone of importance balanced with “lightness” so the subject doesn’t seem oppressive. Get familiar with the book you choose and “rehearse” once or twice before you go.

“Booster” Discussions

Some parents may read this heading and think, “Oh, no – *more* discussions? It’s hard enough just to get through the “big one.” Actually, once you have had the age eight discussion, sex will be a far easier subject to approach with your child. In fact, if anything, some eight year olds want to discuss it too much – and with just about everyone. We’ll never forget an experience with one of our sons at a Cub Scout banquet, just after his eighth birthday. He was seated at the other end of a long banquet table, and when we looked over at him during dessert, we noticed that he was the center of attention: Every other Cub Scout around him was leaning in, listening attentively, as Josh held court with his newfound wisdom. And it wasn’t in the hushed tones of some joke or dirty story, it was expansive, open, excited, as if he were talking about the most wonderful, awesome thing in the world! Needless to say, we had forgotten the part of our discussion that suggested privacy and discretion.

The point is that once an eight year old has the positive orientation of the big talk, subsequent discussions are not difficult. In fact, you will find it enjoyable to administer a few “booster shots,” or follow-up discussions.

Note: Again for those wanting an actual dialogue to use in the “big talk” (it reads like a script, showing what you say and what your child will likely respond) ¼ such can be found in the member section.

Phase III: Follow-up Talks With 8-13 Year Olds

Middle-Aged Kids

The follow-up discussions suggested here are for kids between the ages of eight and thirteen, between the conceptual and interest threshold that comes at about eight years and the changes of puberty that come in early adolescence. We call this important but often neglected age span the “middle age” of childhood.

In a way it is a magic time and certainly an opportunistic time for parents. Middle-aged kids are usually extremely curious and interested. They are conversational and conceptual enough to understand most of what is explained to them. They are flattered by responsibility and by being treated as grownups. They are not yet emotionally or hormonally preoccupied with sex, so they can mentally take a step back and look at sex objectively. And at this age they don't yet, for the most part, have the cynicism, sarcasm, and skepticism that lurks just around the corner in full-fledged adolescence. In short, it is the optimal time to teach a lot of value- and character-related things as well as intellectual things.

When parents go on the offense with middle-aged kids, they often avoid being constantly on the defense with adolescents and teenagers. If we teach our children what to do in the eight-to-thirteen window, we'll spend less time telling them what not to do later. And the trust level and communication patterns we set up before adolescence will carry into the teen years, the period when parent-child understanding often dries up.

All of the follow-up discussions suggested in this section should happen by the time your child enters adolescence and puberty. Then you are in on the ground floor: You, as the parent, have had the “first word” on each important aspect. All that your child sees and hears and experiences of sex in the years ahead will have a chance of falling within the positive framework you have built. This also preserved open communication, allowing you to advise your child on the sex-related scenarios and situations that will come during adolescence and beyond.

In other words, if you have these suggested early, preemptive discussions about sex with your child and thus establish the direction of your child's thinking, then subsequent sex-related messages or situations or circumstances that could otherwise be problematic will become opportunities for further discussion and for reemphasis of what is best and what is not.

Media

Take the time to watch a sitcom or two with your child or to watch whatever he or she likes on TV. It is almost a certainty that parts of the plot or dialogue will have sexual references or implications. When the show is over, ask “opinion” questions: “Did people do the right thing?” “What did some of the words they used mean?” “Do you think they ‘get it’ – about sex being the most beautiful thing in the world?” The same kinds of discussion can also be generated by thumbing through a current magazine together. Even the sexual innuendo of the advertisements leads to good follow-up discussions.

Or you can take a more general approach: “What are your favorite TV shows or movies?” “Do they have anything at all about sex in them?” “Did you hear any words or see anything about sex that you didn’t understand?” “Well, you know, now that we’ve had our big talk and everything, whenever you see or hear anything about sex, tell me what it was and whether you understand it and whether you think it was okay or not okay.”

Peer Group

When you’re the “soccer mom” or the “pick-up dad,” listen in on your kids’ conversations. What are they talking about? Are there certain friends who bring up sexual subjects or use sexual terminology? How do other kids respond? Just by listening you’ll often have the basis for a little private conversation later. “I sure like your friends. They’re good kids. Which of them do you think knows about sex? Why do you think so? Billy talks a lot about it, doesn’t he? What do you think of what he says?” Keep everything positive and nonjudgmental but take opportunities to remind your child that many other kids don’t know all the details, so they’re a little silly or a little gross about the whole thing. Always ask your child if she has any questions about anything she’s heard.

The more general approach here would be to simply ask a few things when there is a private moment or two. “Now that you know all about sex, I’ll bet you notice kids talking about it or using words about it sometimes. Do you?” “Which of your friends do you think knows the most about it?” “Do you think they’ve had a ‘big talk’ with their parents?” “Do you think they know how beautiful and awesome sex can be?” “Why do you think some kids make fun of it or tell jokes about it?”

Regardless of how you get these little incidental discussions started, the key is to use them as reinforcements of the same points made in the “big talk” – the beauty of sex, the miracle of it, the importance of it, and the “specialness” of it.

Puberty Discussions

Most public elementary schools teach “maturization” classes in the fourth or fifth grade, which is another good reason for the timing of the age eight parental discussion – to get a positive foundation laid before the bricks and boards of scary and random information start flying in from every angle with every kind of twist.

School maturation and sex education classes range from straightforward and useful to absolutely awful, depending on the teacher, the school district, the curriculum, the politics, and other factors.

Base the timing of your personal puberty discussion on when maturation or elementary sex-ed classes start in your child’s school and on when you think the earliest aspects of your child’s puberty will begin. Be sure you precede and supersede both. If you have already laid the groundwork through the “big talk,” in which you mentioned the word “puberty” and explained it as the growth process that makes it physically possible for people to have sex and start babies, it is a fairly natural and rather exciting thing to watch for the right opportunities for you to elaborate.

Note: Again, actual dialogues for these discussions appear in the member section, along with an outline for helping kids to make “decisions in advance” and a section on “especially for boys” and “especially for girls.”

Phase IV: Behavior Discussions with 11-16 Year Olds

Shifting from Basics to Behavior

At this point, assuming that you’ve had the earlier discussions with your child, the facts he or she needs to know about sex are pretty well in place, and you have established a positive and upbeat attitude about the beauty and wonder of mature, committed sex. The question now is one of actual practice and behavior. With eleven to sixteen year olds in mind, the goal is teaching and encouraging sexual restraint and responsibility.

All parents want to safeguard and protect their children, and as we meet with fellow parents throughout the country, the overwhelming majority feel that abstinence, at least through the high school years, is the best kind of protection to work for and the best safeguard of a happy childhood and a good marriage and family later on.

Although they know what a challenge it is, many parents today hope for a greater degree of sexual restraint in their children than what they practiced themselves. Our children’s world is simply more dangerous than the one we

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grew up in. The stakes are higher now; they have more to lose and more to gain. There is more to worry about, more to protect from and more need for solid, lasting family commitments.

It's both harder and more essential for kids in today's world to practice sexual restraint and responsibility. So how can parents teach it and encourage it? The only way we know, other than by example, is through the honest, open communication and reasoning.

In an ideal world, all parents would have early discussions with their kids about sex, and children would grow up with a healthy attitude, practice sexual restraint and responsibility, and save intimacy for a time when they were mature and committed. In the real world, however, sex frequently happens too early, and kids as well as parents, are often left with feelings of guilt and a sense of an irrecoverable loss or an uncorrectable mistake.

Yet there is a trend right now in this country away from this kind of finalism or fatalism. The idea of starting over, sometimes called "secondary virginity" or "revirginating," is catching on with thousands of teens and thousands of families.

The thing to remember is this: If you as a parent have thought the matter through and have concluded that abstinence until maturity and commitment is best for your child, then that conclusion is equally valid whether or not your child has had previous sexual encounters. And if your child has made or can make a decision that waiting is best, that decision is valuable and useful even if there has been earlier sexual experience. The point is, we can't make decisions about or set goals for the past, only the future.

Don't spend too much time wishing you or your child had behaved differently in the past. Think instead about what is best for the present and the future. Think first about your child's protection if he or she is sexually active, but if you now believe that the best and most complete protection is abstinence, set that as your goal and work toward it. Be realistic and understand that changing an attitude or a behavior pattern is more difficult than building one from scratch, but be assured that it can be done.

If you have already progressed through some of the discussions suggested here only to find that your child, previously or recently, has had sexual experience, simply reassure him or her that everything you have talked about is still valid and that while it may be harder, he can start over. Then redouble your efforts to open up the subject and to help your child make reasoned, informed decisions about what is best for his life and for his future.

Note: Go the members site for dialogue discussions on [Helpful Metaphors](#), [Pornography and Media Images](#), [Channeling and Transforming Sexual Thoughts](#), [Waiting on Dating](#), and an essay on ["Recreation or Consummation."](#)

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