

Parents Survival Guide to 50 Shades of Grey

By: Miriam Grossman, M.D., child and adolescent psychiatrist

www.miriamgrossmanmd.com

Part 1

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist I'm in a unique position. Young people walk in my office, sit down, and open their hearts. Soon their secrets spill out: I was drugged and raped. I'm sleeping with my best friend's fiancée. My girlfriend had an abortion. I want to die.

I've spent the past thirty years of my professional life listening to these, and many other tales, so I have some expertise about the lives of teens and young adults. Their number one problem? Romance.

There's a lot for them to figure out, but they're utterly lost. *What do I want, and how do I get it? How do I deal with peer pressure and navigate the hook-up culture? Are there consequences to sex, or is it just about fun? What's normal? What's not?*

Please know, these are kids who by and large do well in other areas. They're successful at school and with friends; some of them are accomplished musicians and athletes. But romance? That's where they're thrown off-track, and there are lots of tears, anger, and regret.

I often wonder to myself, *I know this kid has responsible, loving parents...where are they?*

Moms and dads, guardians and grandparents, I urge you: no matter how awkward it is, you must speak to your children about intimacy – what it is, and what it is not. I'm talking not only about teens, but also tweens who are mature, or who hang out with teens.

The perfect opportunity is here. Hollywood's gift to us this Valentine's Day is *Fifty Shades of Grey*. With Universal Picture's mega million dollar publicity campaign, and a soundtrack by Beyonce, your child is about to be bombarded with a dangerous message about romance.

Fifty Shades of Grey teaches your daughter that pain and humiliation are erotic, and your son, that girls want a guy who controls, intimidates and threatens. In short, the film portrays emotional and physical abuse as sexually arousing to both parties.

You know these are foul lies, but your kids may not be sure. If the world was a better place, they would never hear such awful things. But this is the world we live in.

The good news is you can turn this to your advantage. Don't dread all the hype, because it's a chance to connect with and help your child in a big way. Every billboard, preview, and sound clip is a precious opportunity, a chance to warn your child about being manipulated. It's a springboard for discussion about disturbed relationships – how to recognize and avoid them.

In the coming blog posts, I'm going to tell you how to make lemonade from lemons. I'll explain the dangers this film poses to your sons and daughters, and provide tips on how to speak with them. A letter from me to your child, that you can use as you wish, will also be available. You'll see, your family will not only survive the hysteria around this film, it will thrive!

To begin, two suggestions:

1. Learn about the film's plot and main characters, Christian and Anastasia – this will give you credibility. Do this by reading a synopsis such as the one on Wikipedia. If you want more than that, there's a long, detailed one at the bookspoiler (**warning:** obscene language).
2. Identify some opportunities for private and uninterrupted time with your child. Perhaps in the car, or while working together in the kitchen or garage. If you don't think it's going to happen, consider a bribe: *There's something really important I want to talk about. If you turn your phone off for fifteen minutes while we chat, I'll give you five bucks.* There's nothing wrong with this.

My goal is this: by Valentine's Day, you're going to say: *thank you, Universal Pictures. I used to procrastinate about talking with my child about this difficult subject. But Fifty Shades is so extreme, so over the top, that I had to step up to the plate. And I'm so pleased I did...because we had one of the most important conversations of our lives.*

Part 2

Is this relationship healthy or sick?

Fifty Shades of Grey follows Ana, a college student inexperienced in love, as she enters a dark relationship with a troubled man, rescues him from his inner demons, marries him, and rides with him into the sunset.

Excluding hard pornography, I believe Hollywood has never produced a film so hazardous to young women.

Here's the first of two central concepts that harm your daughter:

1. Ana consented to being humiliated and abused, so it's ok.

No, humiliation and abuse are never ok. Consenting to it is a terrible, self destructive decision.

Why would Ana, or anyone else, agree to be assaulted? Maybe she wanted to please her abuser. Perhaps she thought she deserves to be punished. Or maybe she's heard that some people enjoy it, and she's curious.

Whatever her thinking, it's not emotionally healthy. A psychologically healthy woman avoids pain. She seeks a relationship that is safe, supportive, and trusting. She wants to feel cared for and appreciated. If there is any hint of danger, she runs.

Many well meaning people argue that Ana and Christian get to decide what works for them in their personal lives, and if the choice is thoughtful and freely made, then it's ok. This includes sadomasochism, which has been promoted to young people by "reputable" organizations such as Columbia University and Planned Parenthood.

Their thinking is reflected in a recent post on my blog,

"..I disagree with your vilifying the book series... never once is Anastasia forced to do anything. She has free will and choice of what happens to her the entire story. There are so many variations on the spectrum of what people are comfortable with in their relationship. Just because one variation makes someone uncomfortable, doesn't mean it's wrong."

Let's check that reasoning. What if we applied it to other personal decisions?

By her own choice, Anastasia went on a diet of cheezwhiz and gummy worms. No one pressured her, she could have picked other diets. So the decision was right for her.

One day, Christian became distraught over world hunger, and decided to commit suicide by crashing his private helicopter into the Seattle Harbor. It was a good choice, because that's what made him comfortable, and he wasn't forced into it.

Silly examples, I know, but they demonstrate the flawed logic. Sure, people have free choice. But it doesn't follow that every time they exercise that free choice, their decisions are good for them, ethical, or even rational.

The decision to consent to any form of abuse is a self destructive one – end of story. The toxic power of *Fifty Shades of Grey* lies in its ability to plant doubt in your daughter – it leads her to conclude it's not altogether clear. The goal is for your daughter to believe everything, even this, is nuanced.

Here's how it works. Ana and Christian's initial relationship is on the dark side. There is stalking, emotional abuse, and violence. With time he opens up. Ana learns he's had a hard life, that's all. Deep down, Christian is a good guy. He buys her a car and makes sure she eats well. Things are not so dark after all; there's some light between these two. We start to feel sorry for Christian. He must tie up Ana and make her scream? Well, it's not his fault. By the end, there's a proposal, a wedding, a baby or two. There's darkness, but there's lots of light too. *Fifty Shades of Grey* — get it?

And therein lies the danger. There are vast differences between dark and light, healthy and unhealthy. *Fifty Shades of Grey* blurs that distinction. It leads your daughter to wonder, what's healthy in a relationship? What's sick? There are so many shades of grey...I'm not sure.

But with her safety at risk, there's no room for confusion or doubt. You want your daughter to be one hundred per cent certain: an intimate relationship that includes violence, consensual or not, is emotionally disturbed. It's sick.

This is black and white. There are no shades of grey here. Not even one.

Part 3

In my previous blog, Part 2 of my Parent Survival Guide to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I argued that emotional or physical abuse is **never ok** in an intimate relationship, even with both parties' consent. Some people contend that if permission to be harmed is freely made, it's a sound choice, and should not be challenged. I demonstrated how their reasoning is faulty.

In this post, Part 3 of the Survival Guide, I provide additional examples of dangerous ideas promoted by the film. (I'm assuming parents have a rudimentary knowledge of the film's plot. If not, it is important to find out.)

First, a central theme of the story: a good woman (Anastasia) can save a troubled man (Christian) from his inner demons.

Christian has demons alright. Trauma, abandonment, abuse – he's had them in spades. And all those hours with therapists didn't help a bit, he claims.

Where doctors failed, young, inexperienced Ana succeeds. With her by his side, Christian grows into a loving husband and father. So by the end, Ana was rewarded for picking a man whose inner life was in ruins. Could it be?

Anything is possible, but certain things are highly unlikely, and this is one of them. In the real world, it's imprudent to expect people will change at all, let alone in a dramatic fashion. In the real world, Ana would pay for her poor decision.

Your daughter needs to hear a different message: it's wise to pick a man based on who he is right now, not who she imagines he could be. If she is drawn to the idea of rescuing souls in distress, she might consider becoming a social worker.

Next: the idea that along with exercising her free will, Ana made a thoughtful, informed choice about Christian. The argument goes like this: she got to know him and considered the pros and cons of his demands. She read about sadomasochism on the internet, and reviewed the contract describing his rules. Therefore, the relationship was entered in a cautious, deliberate way.

Incorrect.

Ana's vision of Christian was blurred because very soon after meeting, they began having sex. Science suggests their intimacy jumpstarted her feelings of attachment and trust, before she knew

if he deserved them. When Ana was with Christian, hormones told her brain: you're with someone you trust now. You can relax. You can bond.

This was before the long discussions, research, and document review. By the time she got around to all that, she was partial to him. A detached choice was less likely.

Neuroscience also demonstrates that emotional memories are encoded more deeply than neutral ones. Ana's first sexual intercourse was with Christian – an emotionally powerful experience that more likely than not would affect her impression of him.

Another obstacle for Ana: she never confided in someone older and wiser before getting involved. Christian made sure that wouldn't happen by insisting Ana sign a non-disclosure agreement very early on. That's right, she had to enter a legal agreement preventing her from telling anyone he was an entrenched sadist. With some alcohol in her system, Ana agreed.

Sex, alcohol, manipulation – hardly the ingredients of a thoughtful decision. For young women to believe this endangers them.

Make sure your daughter understands the power of intimacy. Without her knowing, it promotes feelings of attachment and trust. Her first sexual experience is not something she'll ever forget, and those memories can intrude when they're least welcome.

Girls have told me: I found my soul mate, I love him with all my heart, but when we are intimate, I suddenly think of someone else – what can I do?

I tell them it takes time. Make new memories, I say, and they'll replace the old ones.

I tell them that, but whether they'll succeed, I don't know.

Part 4

The purpose of my Parent Survival Guide to *Fifty Shades of Grey* is to provide the insights and tools parents need to protect their children from the idea that violence and humiliation can be erotic. In Part 1, I gave introductory information. In Part 2 and Part 3, I focused on the harm posed by this concept to young women.

Now I'm turning my attention to young men – teens, young adults, and tweens who hang out with older kids. As the film's debut approaches, Universal Studio's massive publicity campaign will reach your son as he stands in line at the grocery store or checks his email. You must speak with him about the movie's warped ideas, before he starts to associate romance with handcuffs.

First let's get one thing out of the way. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is pornography. The destructive nature of porn to the mind and heart is well documented. There's enough information on this phenomenal site for several heart-to-heart conversations with your children.

It's unlikely, I think, that your son will actually see the film, unless it's to please his girlfriend. But unless you've managed to completely shelter him from our upside down world, he'll hear about it. The ideas can still have a significant impact.

A young man wrote me:

My friends and I saw a level of excitement about this book like we've never seen before. Our girlfriends were almost obsessed with it, so we wanted to know, what's the big deal?

We discovered that the book is not even well-written; its draw is the sexual fantasy. That in itself was difficult for some of us – what's wrong with me that she has to fantasize about other scenarios?

But it got much worse. What's the fantasy? Being completely controlled and intimidated by a man who ties her up and degrades her.

What? That's what a woman dreams of? That's what sold 100 million copies? What am I supposed to do – recreate that type of scene? I want to please her, but what if I'm not into that?

My whole life I was taught to be sensitive, caring, and respectful. I mean, women always insist that's what they want in a man. I'm totally shocked and confused.

You don't want your son to be perplexed about such an important issue. He must be absolutely clear that abuse of an intimate partner is **never ok, under any circumstances**. Otherwise, he could pay a high price. Just one incident could throw his life off track and destroy his dreams. Consider what happened to Canadian journalist Jian Ghomeshi.

Ideally, a discussion about a sensitive topic such as this takes place between a father, or father substitute, and son. But life is seldom ideal. A mom, or other loving adult can also step up to the plate.

Just say it straight. Listen, don't be fooled by all the hype around Fifty Shades of Grey and its glamorization of sadomasochism. An emotionally healthy woman does not want to be flogged! She wants to be cherished, not controlled. Protected, not stalked. She wants a ring and a wedding date, not handcuffs.

You know this is true, but he may not be sure. Tell him.

He may ask: *If that's the case, why are girls going crazy for the movie?*

You can explain: *Some girls (certainly not all) go crazy for Fifty Shades of Grey because of the completely made-up character called Christian Grey.*

You see, the author was focused on one thing: making a lot of money. Apparently she didn't mind if the ideas in her book can harm young people like you and destroy your dreams. Her eyes were on your wallet – she just wanted people to buy her book (and the movie studios just want you to buy a ticket).

You can't make a lot of money by writing a romance about a sweet, beautiful girl and an abusive guy with no redeeming qualities. So the author cleverly blended some good qualities into the nasty character. She added some light, some truth, to the darkness and lies. And voila – meet Mr. Grey.

The truth is that a woman is drawn to healthy masculinity. The lie is she wants a man to control and abuse her.

The author convinces many readers that Christian has some healthy masculinity. For example, he is ambitious and accomplished. He is determined in his pursuit of Ana, there's nothing wishy-washy about him. He wines and dines her, and protects Ana from creeps who hit on her. He seems to cherish her. He buys her a car. When Ana is drunk and vomits, he holds her hair back.

What a sweet guy – a sweet guy who every so often needs to handcuff her to the bedpost, and beat her with a belt.

Again, a healthy woman does not want to be beaten. A healthy woman wants her man to have some determination, ambition, strength, and the ability to protect and provide. For various reasons, those qualities are hard to find these days. When she discovers them in Christian Grey, she drools. For a few moments of make-believe, she parts with her money, buys the book and sees the movie.

So the danger of the story is in the blurring in Mr. Grey of truth and lies, light and darkness. It's all in the title – Fifty Shades of Grey – get it? Some things in life are nuanced, they are not black and white. But this is. Never be involved in a relationship that includes emotional or physical abuse.

That's it. If you can give your son this insight, and he really internalizes it and *knows it*, that's big. Congratulations!

A few other things to mention: A girl (or boy) may approach your son with a sadomasochistic relationship in mind. "Let's see what it's all about. Maybe you'll like it." He should run for the hills. (Even if she consents, the next day she could have him arrested.)

A girl may say, "A part of me is turned on by the idea". Your son should know it's an unhealthy part of her. She'd be wise to starve, not feed, it.

Explain to him the inconsistency between what many young women say they want in a man, and the choices they ultimately make. The inconsistency is not his problem, it's hers, but it can lead to his heart being broken and other difficulties, like a pregnancy or STD. It's wise to wait for someone who knows who she is and what she wants.

To conclude, the blend of chivalry and abuse in fictional Mr. Grey is hazardous to our flesh and blood boys. We already have an epidemic of mistrust and misunderstanding between the sexes.

Fifty Shades of Grey fuels the epidemic with high octane gas. Educate your son so he's prepared for what's coming.

Part 5

Mom, who's Mr. Grey? Dad, what do those handcuffs mean?

Parents, get ready for questions. As the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on February 13th nears, an aggressive marketing campaign is underway that romanticizes sexual violence.

Don't underestimate the impact of the hard sell on your kids. Even if they don't see the film, they are absorbing its toxic message, and need your wisdom and guidance.

It's difficult to overstate the dangers. *Fifty Shades of Grey* teaches your daughter that pain and humiliation are erotic, and your son, that girls want a guy who controls, intimidates, and threatens.

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I consider it my professional responsibility to help parents deal with this difficult issue, so I've been blogging about the harm posed by the film.

But there's a silver lining to this dark cloud that is Hollywood's gift to us this Valentine's Day.

While the ideas promoted by *Fifty Shades of Grey* are vile, they present a precious opportunity: to explain truths your children must know, but won't hear anywhere else. Every image of those handcuffs and each TV trailer holds that chance.

In this post, I provide guidance on how to speak to children – young adults, teens, and tweens if necessary – about the disturbed behaviors glamorized by what could become a blockbuster film.

First, some assurance. I guarantee you will have a significant influence on your child. *What you believe matters*. Your expectations matter. This is so regardless of any poor choices you may have made through the years.

Even if your teen shrugs off everything you say with a roll of her eyes, I promise you, she hears every word.

To prepare, learn about the film's plot and main characters, Christian and Anastasia – it will give you credibility. Read a synopsis such as the one on Wikipedia. If you want more, there's a long, detailed one at thebookspoiler (**warning**: obscene language).

Identify some opportunities for private and uninterrupted time. Perhaps in the car, or while working together in the kitchen or garage. *Listen, there's something really important I want to talk about. You need to turn your phone off for fifteen minutes while we chat.*

Note: I'm sure you've already talked to your children about genuine love and intimacy. In the interest of time and space I don't address that here.

Also, as I walk you through these talking points, keep in mind that you'll be adjusting them based on your child's maturity, and his exposure to our culture. Finally, this information applies to Moms as well as Dads, sons as well as daughters.

It's your job as a parent to keep your child away from harm, and you take that job seriously. For example, you've talked with her about the danger of junk food and cigarettes, and about bullies.

Now you want to warn her about dangerous ideas.

Ask your daughter: Has she heard about the movie coming out called *Fifty Shades of Grey*? What has she heard?

You've learned about the film from people you trust, and are concerned about the impact it could have on her, even if she doesn't see it. Of course, you disapprove of lots of movies, but you happen to know that this one is particularly awful, really over the top. So you must discuss it with her for a few minutes.

To begin, the movie is pornography. The destructive nature of porn to the mind and heart is well documented. (There's enough information on this phenomenal site for several heart-to-heart conversations with your child.)

Fifty Shades of Grey is about a man, Christian Grey, who is very confused about love. In his mind, love is tangled up with bad feelings like fear and pain. Mr. Grey is not able to have a normal relationship; he can only enjoy a woman who lets him hurt her.

It sounds strange, you can tell her, because it *is* strange. You wish she didn't have to know about all this, but sadly, she does.

He meets Ana, who's young and immature. She falls head over heels for Christian, and allows him to treat her badly. By the end of the story, they are married and have a family. We are led to believe that with Ana's love, he has changed.

Your daughter doesn't need to know more details. She needs to trust you that it's dark, horrible stuff. Part of growing up is recognizing what she *doesn't* want to know, then turning and staying away from it.

This movie is dangerous because it might lead her to think:

1. Abuse is sometimes ok, even romantic
2. With love and support, an abusive person will change

You want her to know that **physical or emotional abuse is never ok, even if someone consents**. There's no room for confusion or doubt here. You want her to be one hundred per cent clear about this.

A relationship that includes violence is disturbed. The people involved have emotional problems. A psychologically healthy woman avoids pain. She seeks a relationship that is safe, supportive, and trusting; she wants to feel cared for and appreciated. If there is any hint of danger, she runs.

It's a mistake for an intimate relationship to be a "project", in which she hopes to save a man from himself. In general, people don't change.

When Ana agreed to be abused, she made a terrible, self-destructive decision. Only in fiction would such a "romance" end happily. In the real world, Ana would pay for her poor choice of a partner.

You know your daughter is smart. But you also know that even the most brilliant mind can be manipulated. Ideas can be planted. Doubts can be planted. That's what Hollywood does best!

You have these hot movie stars, music by Beyonce, and Hollywood megabucks, telling this story like it's a fairy tale. It's not. People like Christian Grey end up in jail. Girls like Anastasia end up battered or dead.

It goes without saying that she should not see this film. But you're saying more than that – she should be able to recognize and flatly reject the dangerous ideas it promotes.

One last thing, parents, about the anxiety you may have about discussing this with your son or daughter. It could be a good thing. Your child will grasp that this is a big deal. More important, she'll think, "My Mom is explaining all this even though it's tough for her. Wow, she really loves me."

There's a lot more I could say, but I think this is getting too long. I hope my suggestions here and in other parts of the Parent Survival Guide ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#)) help you connect with your child and have some meaningful discussions. Please let me know how things go at your house; were you able use *Fifty Shades of Grey* to your advantage? I love to hear about adults protecting the young people in their lives.