

RAISING GIRLS TO RESIST TOXIC TEACHINGS ON SEX, SELF, AND SPEAKING UP: INTERVIEW WITH SHEILA WRAY GREGOIRE

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 223 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have Sheila Wray Gregoire back with us for a discussion about what our daughters deserve from us as parents and as a Christian community. Sheila is an author, podcaster, and researcher into evangelicalism and sex. She's also the founder of baremarriage.com, and together with her team she has surveyed over 32,000 people for her books, "The Great Sex Rescue," and her newest book, "She Deserves Better." Now, if you want to hear our conversation on her book, "The Great Sex Rescue," you can head over to Episode 108 of the Flying Free Podcast. Welcome back, Sheila.

SHEILA: It's great to be here. Wow. You've got what — 115 episodes in between. That's pretty good.

NATALIE: I know. For some reason I thought that I had had you on here more than I have. I think this is only the second one, so we need to remedy that.

SHEILA: I know, because we chat all the time in the background.

NATALIE: Right. Well, okay — you have this brand new book out. I'm so excited about it. Can you give us an overview of it? It's called "She Deserves Better." Tell us why you wrote it and some of the research that went into it.

SHEILA: Sure. Well, I've got to go back in time to "The Great Sex Rescue," which, as people hopefully will remember, I wrote because I read "Love and Respect" and I freaked out. I just completely freaked out because of how abysmally it talked about sex. And I was naively under the impression that, "I love Jesus, all these other authors love Jesus, so we must all be saying the same thing." And when I read "Love and respect," I realized, "Holy cow — this is bad. So I have to do something about it."

So that began "The Great Sex Rescue." We surveyed 20,000 women. Well, 22,000. And we're looking at ways that evangelical teaching can actually affect women's marital and sexual satisfaction and how it can totally mess it up if we're believing toxic stuff. And so I had all these women saying, "Wow, this is so great. I feel so validated. I feel so free." And that's wonderful. I'm really glad that we got such great feedback.

But then people were saying, "But now I'm at a total loss. I don't know what to do, because all I ever heard was toxic stuff. So I don't want to give the toxic stuff to my kids, but I also don't want the pendulum to swing to the other direction and not tell them anything. So what do I do?" So we thought that was a pretty good question. So we surveyed another 7,000 women looking at how their experiences as teenagers and the things that they heard in youth group as teens affect them long term and which ones are toxic, what we need to get rid of, and how we can talk about this better.

NATALIE: I'm so glad you did that. As I was reading through your book, I was thinking — it's not just my daughters that deserve these things. I have four daughters. My oldest is twenty-three and my youngest is fifteen. But all women deserve these things. I deserve these things. And I feel like I should give some of these... Can I tell what some of these chapters are called so that people know what they deserve?

SHEILA: Yeah!

NATALIE: "She Deserves to Be Set Up for Success," "She Deserves a Big Faith," "She Deserves to Be Heard," "She Deserves to Be Respected," "She Deserves the Whole Story About Dating," "She Deserves to Be Protected," "She Deserves to Know About Her Body," "She Deserves to Understand Consent," "She Deserves to Exist as a Person, Not a Threat," and "She Deserves Permission to Be Big." I mean, just those chapter titles alone... I think this book is not just for our daughters. This book is for us too, honestly.

SHEILA: I know. You read it and you just think, "Poor little fifteen-year-old me."

NATALIE: I know, I know. Seriously. I did. I did. And I've done a lot of healing, but honestly, just seeing all of those things laid out like that, it's so sad. So one of your chapters is about dating. It's called, "She Deserves the Whole Story About Dating: Why a One-Size-Fits-All Approach Won't Work." So is there a dating rule that works better than others, though? And why or why not?

SHEILA: Yes and no. This is the problem, right? So purity culture, what we largely call purity culture, which you can kind of say it was sort of 1995 to 2015 — people might put different dates on it — the problem is it hasn't really gone away. They're just using different words, but it's still very much there. But they were reacting to the eighties and what happened in the eighties when I was a teen, when you were a teen. Teen pregnancy rates were skyrocketing, teen sex rates were skyrocketing, kids were really into alcohol and drugs, and so the whole world said, "We've got to stop this."

So schools started doing comprehensive sex ed and Christian parents freaked out and

said, "No, no, no, no, no. We're not going to do any of that. We're just going to teach abstinence." And that's how purity culture really started. So it was a backlash against a backlash, you know? And part of that was this idea that you're not supposed to date.

Now, here's the thing: The only outcome variable that seemed to matter back then was that a girl shows up at the altar with her hymen intact, right? So she's supposed to be a virgin. And we won't even get into whether there actually is a hymen, et cetera, et cetera. But the point is she's supposed to be a virgin at the altar. Now, you're the parent of some married kids. How many do you have that are married now, Natalie?

NATALIE: Two.

SHEILA: Two. Okay, I do too. I have two children that are married. And I can tell you that as a parent of adult kids, that is not my primary concern.

NATALIE: Right!?

SHEILA: My primary concern was, "Please don't marry an abuser."

NATALIE: Seriously. Absolutely.

SHEILA: Yeah, and I wanted my kids to thrive, right? And so what we said was, "Let's have different outcome variables other than just ending up at the altar as a virgin." So we certainly looked at that, "Are they a virgin when they get married?" But we also looked at, "How likely are they to marry an abuser?" "What's their self-esteem like?" Because better self-esteem means you can have better relationships, better jobs, better mental health. It's good for everything. "What's their marital and sexual satisfaction like once they are married?" "If they want to get married, are they married?" So I'm not saying that it's bad to be single, but if you're single and you don't want to be, that's hard. And no one wants that for our kids.

So let's look at all these different outcome variables, and when you do that, things get kind of murky. Because we divided everybody into four categories, okay? So either you were allowed to date or you weren't allowed to date, and then you did date or you didn't date. So you might have been allowed to date but didn't date, not allowed to date but did date, et cetera. So four different categories. There is no category that scores best on all of our outcome variables. There's nothing.

NATALIE: Okay, interesting.

SHEILA: The one that does the best overall on most of them is being allowed to date but choosing not to.

NATALIE: Yeah. That totally makes sense when you think about it, because they're given freedom to do something and then they're making their decisions out of that foundation of having autonomy, which is healthy. It's always healthy to have autonomy and choice.

SHEILA: Exactly. And if you have high self-esteem, chances are as a girl you're going to look around, you're going to say, "These boys are not worth my time, and I want to have some part-time jobs, I want to be in the school play — I want to be busy. I want to be on sports teams" — whatever it might be. And so those girls tend to do better.

NATALIE: Yeah, that makes sense.

SHEILA: And the problem is as a parent, you can't manufacture that result. The only thing that we can do as parents is really work on our relationships with our kids so that we're talking to them, so that we're empowering them to make those good decisions, but we can't make it for them.

NATALIE: Yep. It's hard. It's hard to be a parent. But going back to the autonomy thing again, our kids do need choice, and I think that as a parent we've done what we can if we've equipped them with the things that they need to make solid choices for themselves, but then you're right — at the end of the day, they have to be on their own to do that.

Okay, so let's talk about clothes, because this is a big one in our circles, and I think there's a lot of confusion and even insecurity about it. So tell us about the long-term effects of the modesty messages on our daughters and how we can talk about clothing choices without causing body image issues or blaming girls for the thoughts that boys might have.

SHEILA: Yeah. You know, this was one of the findings that surprised me. Not that modesty messages were bad — I knew they were going to be bad — but how bad they were was astounding and very, very sobering. So we knew this was going to be a big deal, so we decided to measure four different iterations of the modesty message. I may not get these completely word-perfect, but the idea that girls are responsible to not be a stumbling block for boys, boys can't help but lust if a girl is dressed like she's trying to entice it, boys are visual in a way the girls will never understand, a girl who is dressed modestly is better than a girl who isn't.

So we looked at these different messages, and what we found is that when you believe them, you have a 52% higher rate of experiencing vaginismus when you get married, and that is huge. That is huge. And vaginismus is really bad. Evangelical women suffer from it at twice the rate of the general population. We found an incidence rate of about 23%. It makes intercourse really painful, if not impossible. A lot of women can't insert tampons. Gynecological exams are just nightmares. It's very debilitating. It can cost thousands upon thousands of dollars to do physical therapy and to do trauma therapy and other therapy to get over it.

Now, you can get over it. So if you are suffering from it, please, please, please see a pelvic floor physiotherapist and read our book, "The Great Sex Rescue," because that will help. But this is largely an evangelical problem, and the modesty message contributes to it huge.

NATALIE: That's incredible.

SHEILA: Yeah. And then you'll like this one too: 68% more likely to marry an abuser if you believe the modesty message. 30% more likely to have very low self-esteem, which then leads to all kinds of other poor decisions in your life.

NATALIE: Well, that modesty message implies that men are better than women, though. It does. And so then women who buy into that, they're going to be attracted to men who — or they're not going to be repulsed, I guess, — by men who think that they're better than she is. And then they're attracted to girls like that because girls like that are totally fine with being... I mean, they're not fine with being controlled, but they think that they're supposed to be fine with it.

SHEILA: Or they think there just isn't any other choice because "This is what all men are like."

NATALIE: Right. Exactly, exactly. And it just perpetuates the whole problem. I really think that emotional covert abuse is, I think it's worse inside of evangelical churches than it is out there in the rest of the world. You don't see as much physical abuse in the church, but emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, 100%. Because we basically teach men how to be abusive and we teach women how to take it. That's our theology.

SHEILA: Yeah, we put spiritual language on it. And we teach women that if a man treats you badly, you must have done something wrong. That is the heart of the modesty message, right? "So, he can't help it. And it's not just that he can't help it. God specifically made him to be visual. God made him to lust and to want you sexually."

In the “Every Man's Battle” series of books, they literally say, “Men just don't have that Christian view of sex. So men were made without a Christian view of sex. Men sin sexually. They get there naturally simply by being male. So this is a male thing. It's not just that men sin — it's that God made them to sin.” And so if that's true, there's really nothing that he can do about it. And so all of the responsibility for stopping that sin lies on girls' shoulders. And so we need to be careful what we wear. And this was everywhere in our resources and it still is.

There used to be a lot more rules, like, “You can't wear a shirt that's more than two fingers below your clavicle,” or “You have to cover your shoulders,” or “You have to cover your belly.” And we don't have those same kinds of rules, but we've replaced it with prettier language, like, “You need to dress so that your clothing points to Jesus and so that as you go through life, you're proclaiming the gospel.” There is no gospel aisle in Target. I don't know what that means. But when we make it so subjective, it's so much easier to be judgmental of people, too.

NATALIE: Yeah, yeah. Oh my gosh, that's so interesting. What is your sense of this changing right now? I don't know. I hope it's changing.

SHEILA: I think that women aren't taking it anymore, but I don't think that pastors and leaders are changing how they think about it at all. Do you remember when Matthew West released that “Modest is Hottest” song? I think it was two summers ago.

NATALIE: Yes.

SHEILA: And it went really nuts and there was so much outcry about it, and he eventually took it down. But it was quite clear that he didn't learn the lesson. I heard a podcast with him and Allie Beth Stuckey, who's a conservative commentator, Christian commentator, and they were accusing the people who were criticizing the song as just being triggered because they were abuse victims. But what our study found is that the modesty messages themselves are abusive. It's not that abuse victims are triggered — it's that this message is abusive to girls. It teaches them that “You are a problem, your body is a problem.” And our girls have a right to exist in a female body.

NATALIE: That's right. Not only a right, but it's a beautiful thing. So back to that question, though, I know you do a lot of work on just exposing Christian materials, resources, books that actually have abusive messages in them. Do you think that those are still being sold at higher rates since you started that work? Or do you feel like you've made a dent as far as just educating people?

SHEILA: When it comes to some of the specific books we called out in “The Great Sex Rescue,” I do think we've made a slight dent in “Love and Respect” sales.

NATALIE: I hope so. Good grief.

SHEILA: There's still some books I'm quite concerned about. I do think that we're raising the conversation. When it comes to books for teen girls, there were a whole bunch of them in the early two thousands — they never sold that well to begin with. And so it's really hard to see where the conversation is going now. All you can really look at is influencers. So who are the influencers on Instagram, on YouTube, on TikTok that teen girls look at today? Because it isn't necessarily your big-name Christian authors or big-name Christian pastors. And when you look at these young influencers, they're still saying the same messages, largely.

NATALIE: Oh, shoot.

SHEILA: Yeah. It really is out there. But what you're seeing is that a lot of girls aren't taking it. And I think that's true in wider evangelicalism, is Matthew West didn't know there was anything wrong with his song. And he was completely surprised by the outrage. And a lot of people were surprised by the outrage and very upset at the outrage. But there was outrage, whereas ten years ago, there wouldn't have been. So I think the grassroots is working — all of us together are working. You know, this podcast, my podcast, getting the word out there to people that there are alternatives — that is working. But I don't think we're making a dent much in the seminaries or in big-name pastors. I think it's some individual ones, definitely, but not the big-name ones.

NATALIE: I feel like that's going to be a long-term thing as churches just kind of implode in on themselves because of what they're doing. And then eventually they'll have to make changes at the top. Okay, so is this a book that I would buy and give to my daughter, or is this a book that I would buy and learn about and then share things with my daughter? What do you think?

SHEILA: I think ideally read it first, first of all, because you probably need to reparent yourself. I think we all do. Because it's really hard to parent well if we haven't worked through our own stuff from our teen years, and often we don't realize how much this stuff affected us. So read through it, see what messages you were taught.

For my daughter, Rebecca, who's one of my co-authors, the stuff that really stuck with her was the modesty message, because she got that so big, and it kind of triggered a mini eating disorder in her because she thought she was fat even though she wasn't

because Dannah Gresh had written an article about how “You need to be able to pinch an inch of fabric on your pants or else they're not modest.” And my daughter was really slim, but she was curvy and she had thighs, and it was impossible to pinch an inch. So she went on this — without me realizing it — she went on a “I will only eat seeds for lunch” and things for a while there.

NATALIE: Oh, that's so sad.

SHEILA: Yeah, it really is heartbreaking. So for her, that was it. For me, I grew up before purity culture, right? But the messages that really hit me were more about emotions and how “You're not supposed to have boundaries because Jesus gave up everything for you. Natalie, He gave up everything, Natalie.”

NATALIE: Yep. That's what I heard too.

SHEILA: “So you need to be able to give up everything for other people. If you're not willing to sacrifice for others, Natalie, then you don't love Jesus. You're being selfish.” And that's what I needed to work through, because I didn't know how to have boundaries. We learned “Jesus first, others second, you last.” The JOY acronym was really big. That's not even biblical. Jesus said love others as you love yourself. We're not at the bottom. But we were just taught that we don't matter and “You can't trust your emotions.” I remember hearing about how “You need to make decisions based on faith, not on feelings, because feelings will lie to you. The heart is deceitful and wicked above all things.” And those were the things that I struggled with.

So I think we all struggle with different things, so it's worth reading the book to figure that out. And then if your daughter is sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, totally have her read it. Totally. Even fifteen. If she's younger, then at the end of each chapter there's exercises to do with her that are really quite fun — like role-playing scenarios, just discussion questions. They're really quite fun.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. I thought that was excellent. You could even do that with a group, like a mom/daughter group. Okay, so what about sex? Is there a way that we can talk about sex with our daughters without idolizing virginity or creating sexual anxiety and shame?

SHEILA: Yeah. Just tell the truth, because this is what we haven't done. Do you remember the movie “Mean Girls?” Did you ever see that movie?

NATALIE: I never saw it. I know what you're talking about, though.

SHEILA: But I'm sure a lot of listeners will, so I will tell the scene anyway. So there's this classic scene where the burly gym teacher is giving a sex ed talk and he says, "Don't have sex because you will get pregnant and you will die," right? And that is largely the message that is in all of the books that were given during purity culture. In Dannah Gresh's book, "And the Bride Wore White," she literally wrote, "No babies. Ever." Shannon Ethridge in "Every Young Woman's Battle" said, "If you want to hold your grandchildren in your arms one day, then you need to protect your purity now."

Josh McDowell in his intro to that talked about how if you have sex, you have such a higher likelihood of dying, and this was the message that was given. "If you use a condom, there's thirteen steps to using a condom, and so it won't work." I don't even know what the thirteen steps are. Is one of them getting in the car to drive to the drugstore? I literally cannot think of what could possibly be thirteen steps.

NATALIE: That's so funny.

SHEILA: The thing is, none of that was true. Condoms are remarkably effective, even with imperfect use. They're still over 80% effective at protecting from pregnancy, and they're very effective at protecting from most STDs. We have vaccines for some STDs now. All of our kids will have friends who are having sex, who are not dead, and who are not pregnant, and who are not rendered infertile. And so if this is our message, they're going to know we're lying. And we don't need to lie. We can just simply tell them what we think.

Why do you want your kid to wait until they're married if you do want them to wait for marriage? Why do you want them to wait for marriage? "Well, it's because, look — sex is really serious. It's very vulnerable. I don't want you to be that vulnerable with someone who hasn't actually committed to you. I don't want you to feel really let down afterwards. I want to save you from that. When you have sex, you can feel like you're really close and connected, and it can mean that you misread flags in other areas of your relationship. And before you get married, I want you to know that this person is safe. I want you to go grocery shopping with them. I want you to make meals with them. I want you to play with children with them to see how they are with kids. I want you to see if they can clean a toilet."

Let's talk about what it is that you want for your kids and just tell them the truth. And it seems like parents didn't do that forever, and we thought that "If we tell them about sex, they will all do it." We actually found the opposite is true. The more kids know, the more likely they are to make good decisions. They'll have way higher self-esteem, way less likely to marry an abuser, way less likely to have multiple sex partners. Information

does not make kids experiment. But when you give these threatening messages, like, "You need to protect your purity," then once their virginity is gone, they have no reason to wait anymore.

NATALIE: Exactly. I just thought of another lie that we were told, that every person that you had sex with, you'd have a soul-tie with them. And then I have a couple of adult children who, they've kind of gone off on their own and they have had sex, and that was one of the things that they came back and said, "That's such a lie, Mom."

I have nine kids, so I have two families, really — my older four, and then my younger five. I should really say my older five and then my younger four. And I feel like they're being raised in completely different households. But those older kids have come back and they've given me a lot of feedback on the way I raised them, which is what you're talking about, and that did not protect those kids at all. It didn't work. I mean, a couple of them went the super conservative way and then a couple of them didn't. So all those formulas that we were told as parents, "If you grow your kids God's way, then all of your family will gather around you on your deathbed and they'll all be missionaries and pastors and they will all bless you on your way to eternity," that just wasn't a reality for most of us.

SHEILA: I hope they're still at my deathbed.

NATALIE: I know — I still hope they are too. They're definitely not all pastors and missionaries, though, I'll tell you that. So, many of the women in my audience, they are currently in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages and faith communities, even, and they're trying to navigate the fallout of some of these harmful teachings for themselves. And some of these women, even like me, have either been excommunicated from their faith communities for choosing to separate or divorce their abuser, and others are just afraid that that might happen to them if they make safe choices for themselves.

But we're also thinking about our kids, and we don't want them to grow up believing lies about their identity and their value and their bodies and their boundaries and so on. We don't want them to experience the lifelong repercussions of these kinds of teachings, but we do want them to have a strong faith in God that is protective and life-giving. That's who I believe God is. I feel like I was raised believing God was one thing, and what I've come to find out is that He's completely different.

So how can we protect our daughters and even ourselves, really, from being hurt by churches that might end up... Because I do know Christian women who've ended up, at

least for now, saying, "I don't really want to have anything to do with that faith anymore. And I don't even know if I believe in Jesus anymore." I don't want that for my own kids. What do we do? How do we protect them from going that direction?

SHEILA: Yeah, okay. Let me just tell you the truth again, because I think truth matters, and this is why we did a survey for this and we did an in-depth study. So religiosity and church attendance is a good thing. And this is almost universally across the board. So many studies have found this that they actually don't study it anymore, because it's an accepted fact in psychology. So having a religious belief, attending a church, a religious community, results in higher self-esteem. It results in better marriages, it results in better relationships. It's very, very protective. It's very, very good, because you are in a community where multiple people know you who aren't part of your family. When something bad happens, you have a community to just sit back on. You don't go through life alone. When you have to get up to go to church every Sunday, you just get to be more of an organized family. There are all kinds of reasons for it. Plus you just have God, so that's a good thing.

Now let me give you the "but." And this is a very, very, very large "but." As soon as you believe toxic teachings, all of the benefits of church disappear. And our daughters would actually be better off not going to church than going to church and believing all this toxic stuff.

NATALIE: So the answer is really to find a good church that doesn't teach that.

SHEILA: That's right, yeah. And so a lot of people, I think, who are in these abusive relationships are trying to hold onto their church "Because my kid has all these friends." And I get that. And your child, that matters, and they need to have some agency on what youth group they go to depending on their age, et cetera, too. But if you're looking at an eight-year-old kid, I would say, "No, we can pull our child out."

Because if you're in an abusive marriage, here's what our data said, okay? You were groomed for that. You were set up for that. Probably one of the reasons you're in an abusive marriage is because you were trying so hard to love Jesus and follow after Jesus. This wasn't that you were punished or that you made a bad decision or that... I mean, obviously, in retrospect you did make a bad decision, but I just mean it wasn't on you in the same way because you were raised in a community that taught you that if a boy is angry at you, you've probably disrespected him. And if a boy crosses your boundaries, he's doing that just because he is a boy. It's not that he's a predator — he's just male.

And you were never taught to expect anything better, and you weren't taught to identify red flags, and you were just taught that you'd need to be submissive to his leadership and your job is to support him and to celebrate everything he does while you make his life easy. And that's called entitlement on his behalf. And that is what leads to so much abuse. And it wasn't your fault. But at the same time, if you don't want that for your child, you need to make sure they're not hearing the same messages.

NATALIE: Yeah. And that goes for both sexes. The boys that are growing up, they're being trained to be abusive. And some of them have personalities that just aren't, and so they won't take that and run with it, but other people, there's certain personalities that just lean more towards "Sure. I mean, I'll take whatever I can get." And those kids grow up, and they're going to use that training and make it work for them with their future wives. So it's not just our daughters that we have to be concerned about. It's our sons, too.

SHEILA: Yep. And even if he doesn't have that big personality that could go towards abuse, he still could internalize that entitlement message, especially with regards to sex, and just be a really selfish person in bed or get really resentful of his wife if she doesn't want to give him sex. And he'll feel like he's the one being abused because she's "withholding."

NATALIE: Yeah, really good point.

SHEILA: And that's true even with the gentlest of men when they believe entitlement, especially in the bedroom. So we need to ask ourselves, "What kind of people are my children being exposed to, and what sorts of potential marriage partners are they going to meet in the religious group that I am currently in?" Because if you're going to a church that is teaching all this toxic stuff, then your child is going to be friends with people who believe all this toxic stuff, with people whose parents totally believe all this toxic stuff. Some of the most toxic people that my kids knew as teens were their friends' parents. Really bad, you know? Your child is more likely to go to a college with people who believe all this toxic stuff. And they'll eventually marry someone who believes all this toxic stuff.

So if you don't want them to believe the toxic stuff, then we do need to start questioning, "Is this the right faith community for me?" And the good news is that if religiosity overall is a positive thing but toxic teachings bring it down, then there have to be some churches doing it right, or at least some communities that are open to healthy teachings. And so there's a lot of people who hate the toxic stuff. Get a bunch of your

friends and just go populate one of the small churches down the road that has the sweetest little old ladies making potlucks. They would love to have you.

NATALIE: I feel like usually the sweet little old ladies and old men, though, they tend to be more old-fashioned. And when I say "old-fashioned," they tend to think in the old ways.

SHEILA: I think it depends on the church, because I know we've started going to an Anglican church and it's very different. It's very different.

NATALIE: Okay.

SHEILA: Yeah. I think it depends on the denomination or the...

NATALIE: Oh gosh. That just makes me so curious, now, because I haven't gone back to church since COVID. COVID was my excuse not to go because I just couldn't find one. I couldn't find one that didn't trigger me. So I'm still on that part of my journey trying to figure it all out. And I feel bad for my kids, my younger kids, because they don't go.

SHEILA: Yeah. My daughter likes to say that one of the problems is you get sick of First Baptist and so you leave First Baptist and you're like, "Oh, this is so good. I'm going to go to a new church. I'm going to go to Second Baptist." And then you leave Second Baptist and you try a Third Baptist, and you're like, "No, all these churches are terrible." It's like, "Yes, but you need to not try the Baptist." Get out of the big, flashy church with the big, flashy kids programs and try something that really is more based around community. And I think there's some really interesting church plants starting, and those have issues of their own. Everything has issues, right? There is no perfect thing.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's tough.

SHEILA: But I think the one thing to cling to is community matters, and when we are plugged into community, our kids do do better long term. So just finding a healthy one or starting one or... I don't even know. I don't even know. But just taking a look and seeing what's available in your area. And I know that's intimidating and I'm not trying to make it sound easy, because we spent several years on this too until we've landed somewhere. But it's heart wrenching to leave your community.

NATALIE: It is. I feel like it's something I've given to God and I've just said, "You're just going to have to guide me in this area and just plant little seeds of thoughts — use conversations like this, do what You need to do." And I'm open. I'm 100% open. I just

haven't felt any movement yet, but we'll see. I did appreciate that you put those stats in there about how church involvement actually is really healthy for people, and with the caveat that if it's toxic it does the opposite.

SHEILA: Because I think a lot of people keep their kids in church because we're told church is so healthy, so "I'm going to keep my kids in this youth group," but the youth group's the most toxic part of church.

NATALIE: Oh — our youth pastor growing up, he was having sex with some of the girls in our youth group.

SHEILA: Yeah. 20% of girls have experienced sexual harassment or abuse in their youth group, and of those 20% were from a youth pastor.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh. That's unreal.

SHEILA: Yeah. And if you think about it, if you're in a church where, "Well, our church isn't that bad when it comes to gender because we just don't talk about it much. And I know there's only male leadership, but they don't seem to not like women," remember that in youth group, that is all they talk about. All they talk about is sex and relationships. So even if your church as a whole seems good, remember that youth group is exponential.

NATALIE: Wow. That's a really good point.

SHEILA: Yeah. And the place where you're most likely to hear... People disclose that they're being abused, that they're cutting, that they're struggling with eating disorders in youth group. And we are hiring twenty-three-year-old youth pastors with no life experience, who don't have any counselor training, any trauma training. They're just not equipped for this. And then we take youth group and we separate it from the church as a whole so they're their own entity, and it really can get quite toxic.

NATALIE: Yeah, yeah. Wow. That's a whole other podcast episode.

SHEILA: Yes.

NATALIE: Well, Sheila, thank you so much for coming on here and sharing about your new book. I'm super excited about it. I think it's a book that needed to be written. How long did it take you to write it? Because you had a ton of research beforehand, right?

SHEILA: Yeah, I guess this one was probably about eight months. So I do the writing, Joanna does all the stats, Rebecca does the surveys and the focus groups, and then Rebecca edits and does a lot of the writing. So I like to say all the snarky lines in the book are all Rebecca's.

NATALIE: I love it. I love the snark. That is awesome. This is a power-packed book. I think it's something that all of us as women should be reading, not just for our daughters, but for ourselves as well. So I can't wait for it to come out. It'll be out by the time this podcast airs. It'll be coming out in April and you can get it on Amazon. It's all over the place.

SHEILA: Oh, yeah, yeah. Everywhere you get books. Yep.

NATALIE: Exactly. So it shouldn't be hard to find. All right, that's it. Did you have any other closing thoughts before we...

SHEILA: No. I just want to tell women, you know what? You deserved better. She deserves better. We all deserve better. And I just want to make it so that in fifteen years nobody needs "The Great Sex Rescue." Let's make my book obsolete because we're going to fix it for the next generation.

NATALIE: Wouldn't that be wonderful? I hope so. Thank you so much for your work, Sheila. It's so appreciated and so needed. And that's it, you guys. That's a wrap for this episode. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.