



ERIN HARREL

of Cape Coral has a PhD in education and is the mother of three children.

Hoochie-mama?

How does a 3-year-old **pick up on that?**

Maggie (then 3 years old), her siblings and I were strolling through the mall one afternoon when I heard her say, "Whoa! She's a hoochie-mama."

Once we stopped laughing, I asked her where she'd learned the term. She was clueless about that, but she sure knew what it meant: The object of Maggie's observation was a rather voluptuous woman squeezed into a skirt two sizes to small, what looked to be a bra and a pair of bright red stilettos.

Whoa! How do I handle this one?

I explained it wasn't nice to judge other people, and that "hoochie-mama" was a term that probably wouldn't make that woman feel good.

"She might like it," Riley (then 7) offered.

"Like it?" I inquired.

"Yeah, she might like looking sexy," Riley replied.

I hadn't thought of that. We moved on through the mall that day, but "hoochie-mama" has stayed with us for years. Every time we hear it, we laugh and think of that day with Maggie.

Sad thing is, that day, at



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just 3 years old, my little one had already been exposed to sexual innuendos.

Bare skin is a fact of life in Florida. That's not to say that if we lived in Nebraska we wouldn't see bare skin, but the flip-flop-and-bikini-wearing atmosphere of the sunny south exaggerates our already sex-driven society. For some reason, I had this misconception that it wouldn't have any effect on me and my family. DUH?

At the ripe age of 8, my son Jude already had a girl calling the house. The first time it happened, I asked who was calling and she very promptly replied, "his girlfriend." I think I dropped the phone. He was in third grade! He wasn't supposed to know what a girlfriend was, let alone have one.

With his shy, precious smile, Jude took the phone

and giggled. As soon as he realized all eyes were on him, he went to his room and closed the door.

Oh, no, I thought. This was the real deal! The "hoochie-mama" incident had been a prelude. But this stuff wasn't suppose to be happening at MY house — not yet, anyway.

My husband and I quickly decided that we had a new house rule: OPEN DOORS when on the phone. I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, but I was afraid of what might be discussed if we didn't pay attention.

I have since learned that sooner or later, all things are going to be discussed. As parents, it's our job to help our kids navigate these sexy — I mean scary — times. If we just close the door on uncomfortable topics, our kids won't know how to handle these situations.

'SO SEXY SO SOON' FORUM

■ Erin Harrel joins Dr. Diane Levin and Dr. Jean Kilbourne, authors of "So Sexy So Soon," for an Early Learning Symposium on Saturday morning, Oct. 25, at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Fort Myers. The forum, presented by Edison State College, will address the notion of children growing up in a "sexualized" society. Doors open at 7:30 a.m.; panel discussion is from 8:30 a.m. to noon. Tickets are available at edison.edu/foundation (\$10 pre-registration or \$20 at the door).

When I was asked to participate in the "So Sexy So Soon" panel, I was apprehensive. I'm still learning how to deal with all of this myself. Being a mom is not always easy, but it sure is rewarding when we take the time to be good at it.

I hope you bring your questions and suggestions to the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall on Saturday morning, Oct. 25. We'll learn and grow as parents, teachers and a community as a whole. 