

Sexuality Education Programs for Parents: Helping Children Develop a Reverence for Life

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ABSTRACT: Parents have a special opportunity to help their children develop a reverence for life by teaching appreciation of God's gift of human sexuality. Sexuality education programs can prepare parents for what to say, how to say it, and when to start as they learn how to integrate religious education into sexuality education. Churches and schools have a responsibility to help parents become their child's primary sexuality educator.

It is an illusion to think that we can build a true culture of human life if we do not help the young to accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and in their close interconnection.... Only a true love is able to protect life. There can be no avoiding the duty to offer, especially to adolescents and young adults, an authentic education in sexuality and in love, an education which involves training in chastity as a virtue which fosters personal maturity and makes one capable of respecting the "spousal" meaning of the body.

Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*¹

¹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (25 Mar.1995) §97.

Parents have both the responsibility and an opportunity to provide their children the authentic education in sexuality and love that Pope John Paul II described. In *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family*, the Pontifical Council on the Family makes it clear that “parents have the original, primary and inalienable right to educate” their children.² In short, parents can play a central role in helping their children develop an appreciation for God’s gift of human sexuality in the larger context of a reverence for life.

Parish and school programs can encourage, empower, and prepare parents to provide children with sound instruction that celebrates the gift of life. If parents learn to present human sexuality as a gift from God, i.e., to integrate religious education into sexuality education, their children can develop an appreciation and reverence for life.

Parent programs can provide a catechesis on human sexuality. For some parents, the information may be a review of things they already know. For others this may be the beginning of a thorough catechesis, one that they never received from their parents but may now be able to pass on to the next generation.

CHILDREN LOOK TO PARENTS FOR GUIDANCE

Parents should be encouraged to know that children consistently report they prefer parental guidance on sexual matters. Eighty-eight percent of teens between 12 and 19 years of age said it would be easier to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have “more

² Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and the Meaning of Human Sexuality* (Dec. 8, 1995) §42.

open, honest conversations about such issues with parents."³ Nevertheless, fewer than five out of ten teens strongly agreed that they are getting a clear message that teen pregnancy is wrong.⁴

³ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. *With One Voice: American Adults and Teens Sound off about Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2003).

⁴ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *With One Voice: American Adults and Teens Sound off about Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2001).

Studies confirm that parents can make the greatest difference in their child's sexual decisions. When mothers took a firm, unequivocal line against premarital sex, had a good relationship with their teens, and avoided discussing birth control, their children were more likely to delay sexual activity. And teens who were satisfied with their relationship with their mothers were twice as likely to abstain from sexual intercourse as teens who reported a low level of satisfaction.⁵ Children are more likely to avoid risky behaviors if parents clearly communicate their values and expectations, express concern and love early and often, and exercise supervision of their child's choice of friends and role models.⁶

To be sure, communication of values and expectations does not develop from two or three isolated discussions. In fact, parents may need to be reminded that they often teach their children more by what they do than what they say. Although some parents may be unaware of it, they are their child's role models. When teens aged 12 to 19 were asked to name their role models of "healthy, responsible relationships," 59% named their parents.⁷ As their child's sexual role models, however, actions speak louder than words: parents' lifestyles can cancel out the

⁵ James Jaccard, Patricia J. Dittus, and Vivian V. Gordon, "Maternal Correlates of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior" in *Family Planning Perspectives* (July/August 1996):159-65.

⁶ Bonita Stanton and James Burns, "Sustaining and Broadening Intervention Effects: Social Norms, Core Values, and Parents" in *Reducing Adolescent Risk: Toward an Integrated Approach*, ed. Daniel Romer (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2003), pp. 193-200.

⁷ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003.

benefits of anything they tell their child. Although children may not appear to be paying attention, they notice their parents' choice of words, television shows, and internet sites.

Although research confirms that parents can make the greatest difference in children's sexual decisions, many parents are still hesitant to talk with their children. Close to nine out of ten adults surveyed said that although they want to talk with children about sex, they don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.⁸ Parents who do not know when and how to prepare their child for puberty miss an opportunity to establish the communication and trust that are essential for later conversations on the sanctity of life. Some parents simply rely on schools to talk with their children about sex. But, while many sexuality education programs focus on pregnancy and STDs, few discuss morals, values, and/or religious beliefs. Children need their parents to teach them not only the facts of life but the underlying values—and parent programs can help them focus on the key message of human sexuality and reverence for life.

PARENTS' KEY MESSAGE: THE GOODNESS OF THE BODY

The Bible teaches the dignity and destiny of the human person who is created by God, wounded by sin, redeemed by Christ, and called to eternal communion with God. In the story of creation the phrase "God saw how good it was" (Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21) is repeated after each day of creation until the creation of man and woman (in God's own image). Then there is an important addition. Instead of referring to the creation of man and woman as good, the Bible says, "he found it very good" (Gen 1:31). God only gives good gifts, and this goodness applies to our bodies.

Parents often need guidance to prepare their children for puberty. They also need help in explaining how to integrate physical changes with religious values and beliefs. Sexuality education programs can

⁸ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. *Fact Sheet: Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Dads Make a Difference* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2004).

demonstrate how parents can use the Bible and Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* to teach children about God's plan for the gift of sexuality.

God's gift of life—the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God—is the basis for human dignity. Children can learn that as persons created in God's image, their bodies are innately good and they have a mind to think and a will to choose. And although they have free will and can choose either good or evil, regular prayer and participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation give us God's divine grace to choose what is good.

Programs can also show parents how to use Pope John Paul II's teachings, *The Theology of the Body*,⁹ in discussions with their children. He articulates the true meaning of God's gift of human sexuality in a way that parents can share with their children. Family Honor's *Our Power to Love—God's Gift of Our Sexuality* integrates information on growing up, the procreative anatomy and physiology, the cycle of human fertility, and the magnificence of male and female sexual powers with the wisdom of Pope John Paul II's writings. The authors invite parents and children to share the booklet together to understand better their identities as sexual beings created in God's image and likeness.

The booklet helps parents answer the frequently asked question, "Why are boys and girls different?" Children learn that God designed every part of our bodies and that these bodies are the visible images of God when they express or do loving acts. God created us male and female so that we could love in and through our bodies. God gave us our sexual powers, their fertility, so that we can love as God loves. A married couple's love is a God-like love when it is a permanent, limitless, and life-giving self-gift.¹⁰

PARENTS TO KIDS: THE GIFT IS GOOD!

⁹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

¹⁰ Ruth Taylor et al., *Our Power to Love: God's Gift of Our Sexuality* (Columbia SC: DEPPA Publications, 2000).

Although parents want to teach children about the goodness of the body, they often hesitate to start the conversation with younger children. Programs can emphasize that the core message of the body's inherent goodness can be presented to young children at an age-appropriate level. It is never too early for parents to remind children that the gift of their body and sexuality is good because both are designed by God.

For example, young children often ask, "Do babies grow in their mother's stomach?" and "Why can't boys have babies? We have stomachs." This is an opportunity for parents to read the Bible and say the "Hail Mary" with their children. Children delight in Psalm 139 when they learn that God "...formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works" (Psalm 139:13-14). What a beautiful way to learn that God loves us for who we are!

Although children know the words from the *Hail Mary*, "blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus," they are often amazed to realize that baby Jesus grew in Mary's womb just as they grew in their own mother's. Parents can explain that "before a baby is born, he has a special home called the womb inside his mother where he grows until he is big enough to be born."¹¹ Once children are reminded how much God the Father loved Jesus, they understand that God would never have baby Jesus grow in Mary's womb if there was anything bad about a person's body. This understanding of how a baby grows in the mother's womb can be expanded when a child is able to understand abortion.

As children grow older, they are able to understand the meaning of Genesis 2:24-25 at the end of the story of the second creation: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame." There is never any shame when a man and his wife are using the gift of sexuality according to God's plan for marriage. Conjugal love is a means by which a man and a woman totally give themselves to one another. They are no longer two but form one flesh. In

¹¹ Archdiocese of Washington, *Catechesis on Human Sexuality—Guidelines for Catholic Schools and Parish Religious Education Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1993).

conjugal love, the twofold purpose of marriage is realized—the harmonious good of the spouse and the transmission of human life.

When children are taught that God's plan for the gift of sexuality is to love one person more than you love yourself and to welcome the possibility of a new life, they begin to understand why masturbation and homosexual activity cannot be parts of God's plan. They can understand that a habit of masturbation will not help a person develop the strength and virtues that are needed to love another person more than one's self. They also realize that because homosexual activity is not open to the transmission of human life, it can not fulfill God's purpose for the gift of sexuality.

THE GIFT IS GOOD: THE VIRTUE OF MODESTY

A young boy or girl who is taught that the body is a wonderful gift designed by a loving God can also understand that the body is something precious that deserves respect and protection. Parents can teach children that the virtue of modesty is not limited to clothing. It includes language, reading, conduct, gestures, and thought. All the aspects of modesty help children develop a respect for their own body and the dignity of others.

Teaching modesty must begin early. If parents wait until children are teens, their influence will be challenged by the media and their child's more immodest peers. It is much easier to teach modesty when children are younger and parents control the money and shopping. Children can begin to think about the statements that they are making with their choice of clothes. Teachers report that some parents think it is "cute" to allow their young child to wear body-hugging and skin-revealing clothes. Parents must be alerted that the choice of seductive clothing can put their young child at risk and encourage more immodest clothing as their child grows older. Parents cannot wait until children begin puberty to teach them about modesty. They must begin to address the issue of modesty at home when children are six or seven years old. Whether parents realize it or not, they are teaching sons and daughters to be either modest or immodest. Children pay attention to parental dress and the dress of actors on television shows their parents watch. Children

need to be taught how adults are supposed to dress. Too few parents talk with their sons about modesty; and many religious education teachers and catechists report these boys cannot understand why “light porn” (the boys’ term) is a problem. Parents must also address their sons’ clothing choices (for example, excessively tight pants that leave little to the imagination, the use of immodest gestures, crude language, and viewing PG 13 and R rated movies and music videos).

The most successful sexuality education programs for parents incorporate five distinct elements: parents’ memories, terminology, when to start, how to be an “askable” parent, and parents vs. the media.

(1) PARENTS’ MEMORIES

Programs can help parents review their own memories. Parents are their children’s first teachers in both what they do and say. Without realizing it, many parents will automatically “parent” their children in the same way they were raised. In *“But I’m Almost 13”—An Action Plan for Raising a Responsible Adolescent*, Dr. Kenneth Ginsberg cautions that “most parents repeat the same parenting styles—even the very words—that their parents used with them. Our parents were our primary models. We unconsciously learned how to parent from watching and interacting with them.”¹² If parents don’t look back, they may repeat the negative things their parents said or did. Some recall how parents shared their values and beliefs while others realize that this was missing from their lives. If parents recall that their upbringing did not give them the spiritual support that they wish for their children, they have an opportunity to learn from their childhood memories. Small group discussions among parents give everyone a chance to realize that they are not alone in their concerns. Parents can make an active decision to learn more about the values and beliefs as well as the factual information they want to share.

(2) TERMINOLOGY

¹² Kenneth Ginsburg and Martha Jablow, *“But I’m Almost 13! ”: An Action Plan for Raising a Responsible Adolescent* (New York NY: McGraw Hill, 2001).

The appreciation for the gift of sexuality begins when children are young and learn the names for their body parts. Parents can teach children that using the correct anatomical terms is more respectful than using slang terms. If a child is taught, “This is your nose” and “This is your elbow” but not taught the correct terms for their sexual body parts, they may conclude there is something wrong or dirty with these parts of their body.

Programs can help parents learn from each other—for example, that many opportunities to share values and beliefs are presented in naturally occurring situations. One mother explained that when her children were two years old, she began to ask the same questions every time they had a bath. She asked, “What are the most important parts of your body?” She taught her children to answer, “The parts that make us a boy or make us a girl.” She then asked, “And these parts are so special, what do we do?” They answered, “Always keep them covered?” and she replied, “And what do we call them?” They happily answered, “Only the names that God gave them.” This simple story emphasizes how parents can protect their children from slang and teach young children about the goodness of the body and the virtue of modesty.

The idea that body parts should only be called by the names that “God gave them” is a unique approach to prevent the use of slang. Slang terms do not teach children to respect their bodies or to see sexuality as a gift from God. Too many children refer to these body parts as mean and nasty. One mother reported that her fifth grade daughter said, “Mom I wish you would not talk to me about my body. It’s disgusting.” Slang terms and the exposure to the media contribute to the fact that third grade students’ most frequent question is, “Is sex good or bad?”

(3) WHEN TO START

Parents have the right and responsibility to be their child’s primary sexuality educators, but many hesitate to initiate conversations with their children. Because children are filled with questions, parents will ideally start the discussion before puberty. As early as fifth grade children ask, “What is an abortion?” or “Why is the Church against abortion?” If parents do not know how to talk with their child about puberty or

sexuality, they miss the opportunity to teach their child respect for God's gift of life.

Before they begin to experience the often confusing changes of puberty, children need to be prepared for what to expect. For example, mothers and daughters find it easier to talk with each other about the body before puberty begins. Indeed, communication is less effective if parents wait until mid-puberty to talk with their child.¹³ Discussing the physical and emotional changes of puberty enables parents to start an informal dialogue based on trust and respect. This is the foundation they will build upon later as their child matures and is more able to understand sexuality education.

Young children are reassured when they learn that their body is designed by a loving God. One boy wanted to know why he had two testicles. An honest and thoughtful answer is, "I don't know for sure, but I think that if it is important and there is room, God makes two." Then the parent and child can enjoy making up a list of all the body parts that come in "twos," for example, eyes, ears, lungs, kidneys, testicles, and ovaries.

A family or friend's pregnancy can be a wonderful teaching opportunity. Older children can witness their mother's pregnancy with the younger children. The pregnancy can be introduced by saying: "There is a baby in Mommy's tummy." The fetus can be treated as a living child, never referring to the baby as it, but as the "new baby." Every night during prayers, a prayer can be said for the new baby. Children can also be given the opportunity to attend any ultra-sounds so

¹³ Constance M. Yowell, "Risks of Communication: Early Adolescent Girls' Conversations with Mothers and Friends about Sexuality," *Journal of Early Adolescence* (May 1997): 172-96.

that they can witness the living body of the baby. If a friend is pregnant other families can use this as an opportunity to talk with their children. The same thoughtful ways can be used to tell the children about the “new baby” and the baby can be remembered in the family’s prayers.

Families can also create teaching opportunities. A family of all girls or all boys can volunteer to baby-sit for a baby of the opposite gender. Diaper-changing is a natural time to talk about the God-created differences between girls and boys. Parents can also refer to babies’ bodies for a less threatening beginning to a conversation with an older child. A parent can ask, “Why do you have to be more careful when you change a baby boy’s diaper?” or “How can you tell that the baby boy is going to go?” or “What has to change shape ‘down there’ before a baby boy can urinate?”

(4) HOW TO BE AN “ASKABLE” PARENT

Parents need to develop an atmosphere that encourages children to ask questions. The latest research findings demonstrate that the way in which parents approach sexuality education makes an enormous difference in getting their children to open up. In the field of sexuality education, the goal is to be “askable parents.”

Although children have questions that need to be answered by their parents, many are afraid to ask. Young people aged 15 to 17 gave several reasons for not talking with parents about sex: 83% cited concern about their parents’ reaction; 78% worried that parents would think they were having sex; 77% said they didn’t know how to bring up the subject; and 64 % expressed a belief that parents would not understand.¹⁴

Parents must encourage children to ask questions and to keep asking them. Programs can help by “giving students permission” to ask. Students can anonymously contribute questions in advance that will be compiled and distributed at a parents’ meeting. Parents can role-play how to answer questions. Parents who know how to answer frequently asked questions will be less uncomfortable, better prepared, and more

¹⁴ The Kaiser Family Foundation, *Sex Smart Communication: A Series of National Surveys of Teens about Sex* (Menlo Park CA: Author, 2002), p. 3.

willing to talk with their children. Program evaluations give these group discussions high marks.

Table 1 contains a list of questions typical of sixth-grade girls and boys about God and sex. *Kids' Questions* on the author's web site contains instructions for collecting questions and lists of questions by grade level and topic. *Parents' Answers*, "Tackling Tough Topics—God and Sex" provides suggestions for using *The Theology of the Body* to answer children's questions.¹⁵

Parents can be counseled that no matter what a child asks, they should pause calmly and thank their child for coming to them with the question. A child should never believe she/he made a mistake by asking their parent a question. Parents can say, "That's a very good question and I'm glad you've asked me." Then parents can get more information about the question by saying, "I want to be sure I understand your question. Did this come up at school? Is it something you heard or saw on TV or in a movie, read in a newspaper?" With any question, it is helpful for parents to understand what concerns are behind the question and what their child already knows. A guide for answering the question, "What should we say?" is available on the home page of the author's web site.

(5) PARENTS VS. THE MEDIA

Many parents report that they are overwhelmed by the sexual messages that surround their children. Programs can alert parents to the dangers of the media and help them learn how to become "media managers." While

¹⁵ Mary Lee O'Connell, Aug. 2004, 24 May 2005, <<http://www.ParentsAndKidsTalking.com>>. All references to the author's web site are found at this address.

some parents monitor their children's television watching and use of the internet, others are not as cautious. This accounts for a sixth-grade boy's question, "What does the church have against porn?" Parents can brainstorm how they would answer this question. This is an opportunity for parents to share how they use computer filters and different cable programs to protect their children. Programs can also inform parents about helpful web sites to guide their children's use of the media (see Table 2: "Media Manager" Web Sites).

This is also an opportunity to encourage parents to talk with both sons and daughters about pornography. In *Parent's Answers*, "Tackling Tough Topics—Pornography," Fr. Charley Piatt tells parents that Pope John Paul II's approach toward a theology of the body is the best material we as a church can offer our youth. If parents share God's message about the sacredness of the body and of human relationships, children can begin to understand that viewing pornography does not prove you are a real man or woman (a mature lover). On the contrary, focus should be on the power and beauty of true relationships so children can appreciate the beauty of all people, not just picture-perfect models.

Parents can continue with the message that pornography is degrading. Depending on the child's age parents might say, "What would you think if the model was your sister or brother?" Older children can be encouraged to reflect whether pornography might limit one's ability to sense beauty and be a soul-companion to members of the opposite sex. Father Piatt also suggests that parents build upon the idea that viewing pornography may show an inability to enter into real relationships and the idea, frequently expressed by students, that viewing pornography reflects immaturity.¹⁶

NEXT STEP: PARENT-CHILD WORKSHOPS

¹⁶ <<http://www.ParentsAndKidsTalking.com>>.

Parent programs are but a first step to encourage parent-child communication. A second step is to bring parents and children together for a workshop. The outlines, handouts, and activities for four-parent and five-parent-child workshops can be found at *Program Particulars* on the author's web site. These workshops focus on puberty education for younger children and sexuality education for older children. Both help children learn that their questions and concerns are normal and that other families also believe that sexuality is a gift from God that deserves respect and protection. Another benefit is that parents with the same values and beliefs can begin to form a supportive parent network.

Fifth- and sixth-grade students can attend a puberty education workshop in a mother-daughter or father-son format. Parents and kids give high marks to *Fertility Appreciation: a Family Workshop*.¹⁷ Parents say that the programs are very helpful in lowering parent/child anxiety and encouraging children to ask questions. Children appreciate the special time spent with their parents and state that it is comforting to learn that "it's okay for these things (puberty changes) to happen" and to realize that "all kids are asking the same questions."

Older seventh- and eighth-grade students can attend parent-teen sexuality education workshops that focus on abstinence/chastity. An effective parent-teen workshop has two purposes—to encourage parent-child communication and to help teens develop skills that they will need to make the right decisions. *How to Save Sex for Marriage: a Family*

¹⁷ Ann Gallagher et al., *Fertility Appreciation: A Family Workshop* (St. Paul MN: Leaflet Missal Company, 1996).

Workshop, does both while emphasizing how students can develop the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ann Gallagher et al., *How to Save Sex for Marriage: A Family Workshop* (St. Paul MN: Leaflet Missal Company, 1996).

One organization, Family Honor, Inc. presents family-centered programs in a parent and parent-child format designed to enhance the sense of parent-child "connectedness." The family-centered programs include: *Leading & Loving* (for parents only), *Changes & Challenges* (for parents with their sixth-grade son or daughter), *Real Love & Real Life* (for parents with their seventh- or eighth-grade son or daughter) and *Created to Love: Honoring God's Gift* (for parents with their high school teens). Family Honor's CD-ROM-based teacher training program covers the history of sex education, research data on effective programs, the psychosexual development of children, theology of the body, family systems, and fertility appreciation.¹⁹

PROGRAMS FOR PARENTS: DEVELOPING A REVERENCE FOR LIFE

Religious education programs and schools can provide a full range of parent and parent-child programs that celebrate the gift of life. Parent programs can increase parent-child communication by helping parents learn what to say, how to say it, when to start and, more importantly, what values and beliefs to integrate into their child's education. Churches and schools have a responsibility to assist parents in guiding children to develop a reverence for life and a belief in the right to life for every human person.

All Bible quotations are from *The New American Bible* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, <<http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible>>, consulted 24 May 2005).

Table 1: *Unedited* Questions and Comments about *God and Sex*

Sixth-Grade Girls:

- Is sex bad?
- Is what we learn in public school the same as what the church would teach us about human sexuality?
- Does God think human sexuality is important? If so why?
- What do Catholics think about human sexuality?

¹⁹ Family Honor, Inc., 24 May 2005, <<http://www.familyhonor.org>>.

- How about the church not liking divorce?
- Why does the church have such a strong opinion about abortion?
- Why is the church so big on abortion?
- I think the church should be pro-abortion, otherwise it can lead to unwanted children and over population.
- How come in the church the priests are not allowed to get married and have kids?
- What does the church feel about gays and lesbians?
- Does the church find being bisexual wrong?

Sixth-Grade Boys:

- What does the Church expect of me?
- Is masturbation a sin?
- Why is masturbation wrong?
- Do Catholics believe having sex when not married is against the Catholics' beliefs?
- Does the bible really state, "You can't have sex before you're married (Don't worry, I haven't, just wondering)?"
- When having sex, is wearing a condom against the catholic religion?
- Can you live with someone before you get married?
- What does the church feel about gay and lesbian?
- Why is homosexual activity considered a sin?

Please note: www.parentsandkidstalking.com has suggestions for answering these questions at *Parents Answers*, Tackling Tough Topics– God & Sex.

Table 2: "Media Manager" Web Sites

The Parents Television Council (PTC) provides a *Family Guide to Prime Time Television*. This content-based guide contains the facts that parents need to make informed viewing decisions for their family (www.parentstv.org).

American Decency Association helps parents make media choices that do not degrade or dishonor God's gift of our sexuality (www.americandecency.org).

National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families alerts parents to the risks of the internet and pornography as it equips and motivates them to defend God's truths about sexuality (www.nationalcoalition.org).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides capsule reviews of theatrical movies on network television and movie and family DVD/Video reviews (www.usccb.org).