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## **PARENTS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION**

### **FORMING A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATORS**

#### **Reflections of a Parent Advocate**

Pamela M. Wilson, MSW

### **HONEST INFORMATION**

#### **A Father Speaks Out About Talking to His Children About Sexuality**

Tim Fisher

### **WHO DECIDES?**

#### **Parents and Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

Leslie Kantor, MPH

### **TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY IS NOT ALWAYS EASY**

#### **A Word of Encouragement to Parents**

Debra W. Haffner, MPH

### **RUNNING FOR SCHOOL BOARD**

#### **Parental Advice**

Joan Dentler

### **HOW TO BE AN ACTIVIST**

#### **For the Sake of Your Own Children**

Renee Hillman

### **HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY AND OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES**

#### **A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography of Print Material**

Evan Harris

# FORMING A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATORS

## Reflections of a Parent Advocate

**Pamela M. Wilson, MSW**  
SIECUS Board Director

Many people in the United States share a concern about the consequences of uninformed sexual decision-making among today's youth. Sexuality educators believe that comprehensive sexuality education for all youth would enable them to function better as healthy, responsible sexual people. The opponents to sexuality education, some of whom are parents, believe that sexuality education has contributed to high rates of adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. The majority of parents are confused about what their children need, but, despite this confusion, they support sexuality education.

This article stems from my growing concern about two issues: 1) ambivalence toward parents on the part of educators within the field of sexuality education and 2) an increasing need for educators to support parents in their role as powerful sexuality educators of their children. When I speak to professional audiences about adolescent sexuality and the need for comprehensive sexuality education, I am often faced with questions and concerns about the abilities of parents. Many educators who are critical of parents have been negatively impacted by:

- fear of confrontation or an actual confrontational experience with organized, vocal opposition groups comprised of parents;
- skirmishes with concerned parents of students who attend their educational program; or
- low levels of parent involvement or interest in school or agency sexuality education and other programming.

Educators who have had little interaction with average (as opposed to extremist) parents have missed the opportunity to discover first-hand the very human desires that most parents have for their children as well as their understandable fear of doing or saying the wrong thing.

Sexuality educators must balance their activities to advocate for meaningful sexuality education with activities that provide genuine support for parents who want to educate their children about sexuality inside the home. It is tempting, especially for those educators facing attacks

from small groups of vocal parent groups, to overgeneralize and see all parents as the enemy. This is a mistake that must be avoided. Rather, sexuality educators should find ways to speak to parents and persuade them that their children need positive rather than fear-based sexuality education *both* at home and at school. This article outlines key messages and methods for presenting a convincing case for parents.

### Observations From the Field

Over the last year, in conjunction with a national seminar program, "Time to Talk," I have traveled around the country speaking with large groups of parents about how to communicate with their children about sexuality. During these talks, I was struck by one crucial observation: parents, more than ever, are feeling insecure about their own ability to educate their children. Surveys have shown again and again that parents believe they should be educating their children about sexuality. Most, however, do not believe they can compete with the other informational influences on their children, such as peers and the media. In focus groups recently sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), young adolescents placed parents at the top of the list of influences on their sexual attitudes and behaviors, while parents rated themselves quite low on the list.

Typically, observable levels of anxiety permeate the room when parents attend these seminars to discuss sexuality and their children. The anxiety flows from the following factors:

**1) Fear:** Many parents today are genuinely scared for their children. They worry about all the negative things that could happen — sexual abuse, harassment, rape, adolescent pregnancy, premature parenthood, sexually transmitted disease. The biggest fear that parents seem to have is that their child will develop AIDS. Parents are also afraid of doing the wrong thing: starting sexuality education too early or too late; giving misinformation; robbing their sons and daughters of childhood innocence; having values that are out-moded or irrelevant by today's standards, and so on.

**2) Lack of Comfort:** Most parents did not grow up in homes where sexuality was discussed openly. As a result, parents lack models for how they might create an environment that is affirming of their children's sexuality. In workshops, I have asked parents to review the messages they got from their own family about a range of sexuality issues. One mother literally trembled with anger as she told the group about the damaging messages she had received and how those messages still today interfere with her ability to be a loving and responsive sexual partner to her husband. Parents often need a place to heal their own wounds.

A significant number of fathers feel out of their element when it comes to discussing sexuality at home. Consider the following findings from a Center for Population Options (CPO) Fact Sheet, "Parent-Child Communication About Sexuality" (June 1990):

- Sixty-eight percent of mothers compared with 48% of fathers report ever having talked with their children about sexuality;
- Boys are less likely than girls to receive sexuality education in school or at home;
- Only 18% of young men first learned about sexuality from a parent;
- Forty-six percent of girls compared with 25% of boys report having talked about birth control with their parents.

It's not surprising that these same boys often grow up to become fathers who are unable to communicate with their children. This is a vicious cycle that must be broken.

**3) Lack of Skills:** Parents acknowledge that when sex is the subject, they do not know what to say or how to say it. Most worry that they lack the necessary knowledge to do a good job. Several studies have revealed, however, that parents do have basic knowledge. What they often lack is the ability to meet their children at an appropriate level, to initiate conversations, to listen non-judgmentally, and to respond to questions and behaviors without jumping to conclusions or overreacting.

It is interesting to note that in the Children's Defense Fund focus groups, mentioned earlier, adolescents reported that "lectures" from parents about sexuality issues turned them off. Young people want to know what their parents believe — and why — and they want the information more informally within a two-way conversation. Teenagers in other groups have offered the following advice (reported here in their own language) to parents:

- Give us some uninterrupted time when we can talk with you;

- Listen before you start yelling;
- Listen carefully to what we are saying;
- Don't be so serious. Lighten up a little;
- Admit it when you're wrong or make a mistake.

**4) Misinformation:** The following list of myths continue to confound parents' ability to see their daughters and sons as sexual people and their ability to provide relevant information and skills:

- **Myth:** Information about sexuality is harmful to children;
- **Myth:** Sexuality information leads to sexual experimentation;
- **Myth:** Children do not perceive their parents as important sources of sexuality information and values anymore;
- **Myth:** Gay and lesbian children only grow up in other people's families. Parents control the sexual orientation of their children;
- **Myth:** Daughters need more sexuality education (especially information about contraception) than sons do.

#### **Shifting From Prevention to Sexual Development**

Throughout the decades, but especially now in the 1990s, most parents focus their energies on helping children avoid negative consequences related to sexuality. Of course, no loving parent wants a son or daughter to be sexually abused, emotionally harmed, or infected with HIV or another STD. However, when parents (or educators) have the prevention of problems as their primary goal, they may inadvertently communicate harmful or inaccurate messages such as: 1) sexuality is more negative than positive; 2) sexual behavior is primarily dangerous because it can kill people; 3) sexual feelings, especially for females, are unnatural and must be controlled; 4) females must learn to control male behavior in sexual encounters; 5) all romantic encounters are heterosexual; 6) the genitals are "nasty" and, therefore, less worthy of a label than nonsexual parts of the body; and 7) any touching of sexual parts of the body constitutes "bad touching."

These messages may be offered with good intentions and by caring parents, but they can have a chilling impact on a child's ability to become a sexually healthy adult. I have seen how many children are unable to simply shed these lessons once they have entered adulthood. In the "Time to Talk" seminars I have led, the majority of parents say they want their children to grow up to be loving, responsible, and responsive sexual partners in "appropriate" adult relationships. But how does a parent today raise such a child? What are the facts, attitudes, and skills children need to absorb to develop into adults who are sexually healthy and responsible?

When I ask these questions, parents often start to realize that they need to offer their sons and daughters very different messages than they had previously considered. The following are examples of messages parents identify once they have shifted their thinking from preventing potential problems to promoting healthy sexual development:

- Sexuality is a natural and positive part of your life;
- Your body and your genitals are beautiful and good;
- Sexuality is an open topic of conversation in our home. Although I (we) might not always have the answers and sometimes might feel uncomfortable, I welcome your questions. I also welcome your thoughts and feelings;
- It is very normal for you to experience sexual feelings;
- People have different kinds of feelings about who they are attracted to, who they love, and who they might want as a sexual partner. Many people find that they have these feelings for members of the other gender, some find these feelings directed toward members of the same gender, and others find that they experience attractions toward members of both genders;
- Use knowledge and your values to make decisions about whether to act on your sexual feelings. You will not always want to act on your sexual feelings. Sometimes it is just nice to have them as feelings. Other times you might decide to find a private place to touch and pleasure your own body;
- It gets more complicated when you start contemplating whether to have a sexual relationship with another person, mainly because you must consider the other person's wants, needs, and feelings, in addition to your own. You both will need to think forward to the possible results of your behavior together and take steps to avoid any undesired consequences.
- Sexual relationships can be wonderful when they are right. They must always be mutual (both people want it and have similar expectations) and non-exploitive (neither person is being pressured, forced, or manipulated into it);
- Sexual behavior includes much, much more than just sexual intercourse. Other forms of touching and giving pleasure can be very satisfying;

- Because sexual intercourse is a behavior that can lead to pregnancy or the transmission of diseases, as well as pleasure, it must be very carefully considered;
- Protection should always be used to prevent unintended pregnancy and the transmission of HIV and STDs;
- Using birth control and condoms the right way every time requires a lot of maturity, skill, and concentration. Even adults have trouble with this. This information is important because at some point in your life you will probably decide to have sexual intercourse, and you will need to be prepared;
- I hope that you will (parents give specific values about when they think intercourse is appropriate) because (rationale for this belief).

Changing the focus from preventing youth problems to promoting healthy sexual development requires a major shift in the paradigm that many educators currently utilize as a basis for their work with children and parents. It seems only logical that healthy and responsible sexual people will be better able to avoid problems during adolescence, and they will also appreciate their own bodies, express love and intimacy in appropriate ways, communicate effectively about sexuality with partners, friends and family members, avoid exploitative and manipulative relationships, and engage in sexual relationships that are characterized by honesty, equity, comfort, and responsibility.

### **Empowering Parents**

I have found the great majority of parents to be very open to these ideas. Most parents, after all, care deeply about their children and are doing the best they can with their current level of awareness to influence their children in positive ways. Sexuality educators must recognize the important role we play as allies with parents, sharing the goal of helping children become healthy and responsible sexual beings. This might be especially challenging for some educators on the front lines who are battling organized groups of parents trying to eliminate comprehensive sexuality education. While this vocal minority would like to speak for all parents, they do not. The majority of parents are supportive of sexuality education, but are unsure about their own role and the roles of schools and communities. What I have seen again and again is that parents want and need help.

Schools, religious institutions, community agencies, and corporations must collaborate to create systems for reaching large numbers of parents with information and skills. It is important to inspire parents, to communicate a strong belief in their abilities, and to support them in their roles. Many parents, particularly those from low-income communities, have little trust in institutions such as schools and social service agencies. If parents perceive sexuality educators as judgmental outsiders who view them as incompetent or call only when their child is in trouble, they

# HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP SEXUALLY

## From Birth to Age 12

From the moment of birth, children begin learning about themselves as sexual people. The concept of development is quite helpful to parents. Simply understanding that particular behaviors are predictable at specific ages allows parents to relax and nurture their children's growth. This chart outlines the typical psychological processes, thoughts, and behaviors related to sexuality that many children experience as they progress through childhood. Use it as a guideline for understanding age-appropriate concerns and behaviors.

### **Children from birth to age two may**

- Explore body parts, including genitals;
- Begin to develop an attitude (either positive or negative) toward their own bodies;
- Experience genital pleasure (from birth, boys have erections and girls lubricate vaginally);
- Be encouraged by family (and society) to develop a male or female identity;
- Learn the expected behaviors for boys and girls.

### **Children at ages three to four may:**

- Become aware and very curious about gender/body differences;
- Touch themselves and learn to masturbate on their own;
- Play house, doctor, or explore other forms of sexual play activities with friends and other siblings;
- Establish a firm belief that they are either male or female;
- Mimic adult sexual behavior;
- Begin to repeat curse words;
- Ask questions and peek under clothing of dolls or friends;
- Be curious about own origins and ask, "Where did I come from?"

### **Children at ages five to eight may:**

- Continue sexual play activities and masturbation;
- Become curious about pregnancy and birth;
- Have strong same-gender friendships. Girls and boys are often socialized to communicate in very different styles;

- Show strong interest in male/female gender roles that are often stereotyped;
- Have a basic sexual orientation;
- Have a new awareness of authority figures: teachers may be seen as knowing more than parents;
- Compare their own situation with those of peers; complain about lack of fairness;
- Begin to conform with peer group style of dress and speech;
- Engage in name-calling and teasing.

### **Children at ages nine to twelve may:**

- Enter puberty, especially girls. Early development may be perceived more positively by a boy than by a girl;
- Become more modest and express a need for privacy;
- Experience emotional ups and downs;
- Have romantic crushes on friends, older teens, music and TV stars, counselors or teachers;
- Continue to attach importance to same gender friends;
- Feel awkward;
- Masturbate to orgasm;
- Be strongly influenced by peer group;
- Have sexual or romantic fantasies;
- Face decision-making about sexual activity and drug-taking;
- Initiate sexual intercourse as early as age 12.

This chart was adapted from: *When Sex Is the Subject: Attitudes and Answers for Young Children* by Pamela M. Wilson, MSW. (Santa Cruz: Network Publications, 1991)

will avoid us. If they genuinely feel respect and support, they will welcome us.

Parents need practical advice from sexuality educators. They need concrete strategies for enhancing their communication with their children. They respond very favorably to exercises that have them practice: 1) listening non-judgmentally; 2) asking open-ended questions; 3) seizing natural opportunities to talk about sexuality; and 4) answering sensitive questions. For example, have parents rehearse how they would respond to the following situations:

- Your ten-year old child asks, "How would I know if I'm gay?"
- You find a condom in your 12-year-old's jacket pocket.
- Your 15-year-old asks, "What would you do if I got pregnant (or got someone pregnant)?"

The key in responding to all of these situations is for parents not to overreact or jump to conclusions. They must not assume that the ten-year-old thinks he is gay — maybe a friend has told him that she is gay; or perhaps the child is merely curious. Likewise, a parent should not assume that the 15-year-old is pregnant. She might have just seen a film about teen pregnancy on T.V. I say to parents, "Of course you're panicking on the inside. But if you say, 'You're not pregnant, are you???' you will close the door to communication." The goal is to keep the conversation going, to make the child feel comfortable. An answer such as —"I'd probably be very upset at first, but then I'd calm down and help you figure out how to handle things," is honest, but also supportive.

Finding a condom in a 12-year-old child's pocket, a parent may initially want to respond by asking, "What are you doing with this condom?" or "Are you having sex?" It would be much more productive to say calmly, "I found this condom in your jacket pocket when I was doing the wash. What's up?" This leaves room for the child to say, "I was just carrying it around." If a situation is handled positively, it becomes a teachable moment. The parent can then bring up a range of topics: how to make decisions about sexual intercourse, when it might be appropriate to have sexual intercourse, the importance of protection against unintended pregnancy and the transmission of disease and how to use a condom.

Although practice is critical, I think I have my biggest impact on parents when I offer music as an analogy for sexuality education at home. The words parents use to educate children about sexuality are not nearly as important as the "music" they play. Educating children about sexuality is similar to attending a Broadway musical. When people go to a musical that is truly enjoyable, they often leave the show humming the melody of a favorite song. Theater-goers rarely sing the lyrics from Broadway shows, because they cannot remember the words. When parents talk with their children about sexuality, the children may not remember the actual words, or whether every fact was correct, but they will remember the tone of

the conversation, whether parents were open to questions and accepting of their responses. Most importantly, children will remember how they felt during these conversations. When I ask parents at the end of the seminar, what they will take with them, someone always says, "Don't forget the music!"

## Did You Know?

- According to older teenagers, the most frequent communication problem between parents and children today is verbal criticism.
- 50% of pregnant teenagers seeking abortions consult with a parent, even though there is no law or mandate which says they must do so.
- Parents and educators share many similar ideas about timing and content of sexuality education.
- Most parents believe they should be, and, in fact, want to be, the primary sexuality educators of their children, and children report they would like to be able to talk with their parents about sexuality.
- 85% of adults support teaching sexuality education in the schools.
- 74% of parents support teaching sexuality education as a requirement in the public schools.
- In the 1987-88 season, a typical American adolescent viewed nearly 14,000 instances of sexual material on television. Of these, only 165 referred to topics such as sexuality education, sexually transmitted diseases, or birth control.

Research compiled by James Shortridge,  
Director of Information Services.

**Sources:** Vangelisti AL. Older adolescents perceptions of communication problems with their parents. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 7(3):382-402, 1992; Torres A. Telling parents, clinic policies, adolescents use of family planning and abortion services. *Family Planning Perspectives* 12:284-92, 1980; Alexander SJ. Improving sex education programs for young adolescents and parents views. *Family Relations* 41(4):452-459, 1992; General Social Science Survey of the National Opinion Research Center, 1993; Gallop. 22nd Annual Gallop Poll of the Public Attitudes Toward Public School, *Pbi Delta Kappa Magazine*, 1990; and Louis H. et al. Sexual material on american network T.V. during the 1987-1988 season. *Planned Parenthood Federation of America*, New York, 1988.

# HONEST INFORMATION

## A Father Speaks Out

### About Talking to His Children About Sexuality

**Tim Fisher**

Executive Director, Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International  
Washington, D.C.

**M**y family is playing an active role in the "Gay Baby Boom." My partner and I have a three-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son by surrogacy. As you can imagine, a great deal of planning, careful thought, and much discussion took place before our dreams of fatherhood came true. We spent many hours discussing the following and more:

- Our personal styles of parenting and communication;
- How and when we would talk about sex to our children;
- What our parents did and didn't do, and what they said and didn't say;
- Who would act as same and other-gender role models for our children;
- How our commitment to feminism would be expressed.

Today, our eldest child is only three, so we have not had the opportunity to put many of our theories about sexuality, gender, and parenting into practice. However, we are already dealing with issues and information that we believe need to be a part of our children's education. Very early on, we started naming the parts of the body and explaining to our daughter the difference between boys and girls. We answer all questions simply and completely. We want to communicate to our children that we have no shame in our bodies, and that there are no taboos, no questions that they cannot ask us. Our daughter knows that she has a "Birth Mother," and that my sperm helped make her grow inside her Birth Mother's body.

We have recently introduced our daughter to the concept of privacy. There are some things that are better done when she's alone, like picking her nose, using the potty, or touching her vulva. We've also introduced the concept that she "owns" her body. We've talked about inappropriate touching, not in the context of sexual abuse, but rather that she doesn't have to be tickled or to give or receive affection if she does not want it. We all say, "It's my body," a phrase we got while watching *The Cosby Show*.

Our children's sexuality education goes beyond biology and includes feelings, gender, gender roles, and society. We are teaching our kids the differences (and similarities) between girls and boys, not just anatomical differences, but social ones as well. We try to give our children a lot of different kinds of toys and clothes, as well as a wide range of books. We offer a lot of information and opportunities for them to make choices according to their own personal preferences. Right now, our daughter loves

Barbie Dolls, playing house, wearing dresses, and talking about her "boyfriend." Our son loves to climb and play with things that move. We support these choices and continue to offer variety. Our hope is that our children will always know that different people like different things, and that's a good thing about the world.

#### **Raising Children in a Heterosexual World**

As a gay couple, we want to keep demonstrating to our children that diversity exists in the world. Our family is just another part of all the different kinds of families there are in the neighborhood, for example. We seek out and spend time with other families headed by lesbian moms and gay dads, so that our children will have a context for their family. We noticed that, at about the time our daughter started preschool and began to pay closer attention to videos and television programs, a powerful socializing and conforming force entered her life. For instance, when our family was invited to a lesbian commitment ceremony, much like a wedding, she informed us that two women couldn't get married. However, she was also surprised that there was no wedding ship for us to board during the ceremony. You see, her only experience with weddings was what she saw in the children's video, *The Little Mermaid*.

What is ahead for us? We expect that our children will have many questions as they grow up. We want to keep learning, developing our communication, and working on our parenting skills. We want to provide our children with honest information in a manner that allows them to absorb what they need during their developmental years. In particular, our children will need skills to handle the homophobia they will inevitably encounter. We want them to be a part of a support system, relating to kids like themselves with whom they can safely share the realities of their lives.

Gay and lesbian parents are frequently asked, "Do you want your kids to grow up gay?" For my partner and myself, that's a non-issue. We know that our children will grow up to be who they are meant to be. Gay or straight, they will be fine with us.

*For more information about the Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International, a worldwide support and advocacy group for lesbian mothers, gay fathers, their partners and children, and prospective parents, write to: GLPCI, P.O. Box 50360, Washington, DC 20091, or call the New Jersey office at (201) 783-6204.*

# WHO DECIDES?

## Parents and Comprehensive Sexuality Education

**Leslie Kantor**

Director, Community Advocacy Project, SIECUS  
New York City

Prior to the mid-1980s, the positions of the proponents and the opponents of sexuality education were very clearly defined and understood by the public at large. At that time, those opposed to teaching sexuality in public schools objected on the grounds that providing sexuality information was the job of parents in the home not the job of the state in public schools. Anti-sex education groups like the Christian Crusade published pamphlets in the late 1960s with titles like *Is the Little Red School House the Place to Teach Raw Sex?* Today, however, much has changed, and the overwhelming question about sexuality education is not so much "Where?" as it is "What kind?" In fact, the question, "Should sexuality education be taught in public schools?" has become moot. More than 85% of the general public supports school-based sexuality education, and even the opponents of sexuality education have softened, thus necessitating a dramatic change in their oppositional tactics. Due to overwhelming public support for sexuality education in the schools, Far Right groups have literally been forced to agree that schools have a role to play in educating children about sexuality. They have changed their view in order to keep a following of public support, no matter how small. Thus such oppositional groups have adopted a revised strategy to determine the *kind* of sexuality education which will be taught in the schools today.

Most groups opposing comprehensive sexuality education insist that the only appropriate kind of sexuality education for the classroom is "abstinence-only" or "abstinence-based" education. The terminology distracts greatly from the goal of this approach which is to scare young people into abstinence until they are married. "Abstinence-based" as a label is analogous to the label "pro-life" in that it misrepresents the movement behind the language and causes confusion. In other words, everyone is for life, but not everyone believes that abortion should be illegal. Similarly, everyone believes that children and young people should postpone sexual intercourse until they are mature, but not everyone believes that schools should teach misinformation and present sexuality as a negative force in life, in order to frighten young people from engaging in any sexual behavior before marriage. SIECUS has tried to refocus the debate by calling the opposition's sexuality education programs "fear-based education," a name which more accurately reflects the kind of messages offered in many of the curricula written by those who oppose comprehensive sexuality education. Indeed, "abstinence-only" education relies heavily on fear and shame as a way of manipulating

students, rather than encouraging them to make forthright, responsible, and informed decisions throughout their lives.

Controversies about sexuality education vary from situation to situation. In most places, however, the debate centers around the implementation of fear-based programs versus a more comprehensive approach. Battles between proponents of fear-based education and proponents of comprehensive education often continue over a number of years. Sometimes a school board vote is not enough to put the issue to rest. As a result of controversy, sexuality education programs are now reviewed much more often and thoroughly than other classroom curricula.

While school is now agreed upon as a critical place for sexuality education, it is still the case that parents are the ones who should choose and play an active role in deciding what kind of sexuality education their children should receive. In an effort to help parents feel more prepared for the struggles, controversies, and rewards, this article outlines some key issues that parents will need to know about in order to make informed decisions and to participate more fully in the local school district and in their children's education. Descriptions of comprehensive sexuality education controversies and victories are included to provide a complete background. It is important to note how significant parent participation is to the implementation of sound sexuality education programming, especially now that controversies are on the rise. One year ago, SIECUS published an article reviewing eleven of the most widely used fear-based sexuality education programs entitled "Scared Chaste? Fear-Based Sexuality Educational Curricula" (*See SIECUS Report Vol. 21 No. 2*). At that time, we had documented controversies about sexuality education in 30 states. As of November, 1993, we have documented controversies in more than 150 communities in 41 states occurring during the school years between 1991 - 1993. The time to get involved is now.

### What is Comprehensive Sexuality Education?

SIECUS defines sexuality education as a life-long process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships, and intimacy.<sup>1</sup> Such a process encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. Sexuality education addresses the biological, socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality. This includes thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and



behaviors. Comprehensive sexuality education gives young people the skills they will need throughout their lives to communicate effectively and make responsible, healthy choices. Comprehensive sexuality education curricula are programs which cover a broad range of topics in an age-appropriate manner.<sup>2</sup>

All too often, however, in the course of this debate, comprehensive programs are drastically misrepresented. Some distortions that parents may come across include the following:

- The false claim that comprehensive programs aim to teach young people only how to use contraception and have safer sex;
- The misunderstanding that comprehensive programs are a “how-to lesson” in sexual behaviors;
- Charges that information and education about sexuality could actually influence sexual orientation, increase sexual activity, and subsequently increase abortions.

Far Right organizations have utilized the media to promote these and other distortions in their fight to dismantle sexuality education across the country. They often argue that condoms break and are ineffective the majority of the time. Data from the federal government, however, disagrees with such a claim. Other times, parents may hear the inaccurate charge that comprehensive programs lead to an earlier onset of sexual intercourse in young people, and that only fear-based approaches have resulted in lowered pregnancy rates. Responding effectively to the ultra-conservative manipulative campaign which broadcasts these distortions is critical for maintaining comprehensive programs that assure children and adolescents will be prepared to make responsible decisions about sexuality throughout their lives.

### **Is the Far Right a Religious or Christian Group?**

Sadly, the characterization of Far Right political organizations as “religious” has led to polarizations between religious groups within communities. While the Far Right ideology is based on a branch of Christianity called “Reconstructionism,” most Christians, including evangelical Christians, do not subscribe to the political goals of Far Right national organizations. In addition, the Far Right has effectively used religious name-calling tactics to dissuade people from openly objecting to their policy agenda. For instance, Far Right leaders often label parents and others who disagree with their political ideology and educational methodology as “anti-religion” or “anti-God.” Often times, such a tactic is powerful and causes a halt in the debate, since most people do not wish to be so misunderstood. Parents’ own morality and belief in God or religion is not the central issue when discussing sexuality education. In fact, the overwhelming majority of religious people in this country support comprehensive sexuality education, self-esteem education, and public-school funding. Any coalition seeking

to get comprehensive sexuality education in their local school should include religious leaders in the process who will help to keep the debate focussed on what is truly important. Christian groups need not be automatically stereotyped as being for fear-based education. Furthermore, many Far Right leaders use the Bible and religious beliefs to convince the public that their objections to comprehensive sexuality education are firmly rooted in theology. The issue, however, is not faith. It is instead the freedom to learn. Parents, teachers, administrators, elected officials, religious leaders, and community members must define the points of contention carefully so that people will not confuse the debate about effective education with religiosity.

### **How Can Parents Refute the Misinformation?**

In actuality, a very limited set of arguments is used over and over again by opponents of comprehensive sexuality education to undermine programming and to encourage the use of fear-based education instead. Responses to these arguments can be constructed in order to expose that opponents of comprehensive sexuality education often use incorrect information. Fear-based education proponents often misconstrue data from original sources or document unscientific sources, such as the popular media. Common misinformation used by proponents of sexuality education are important for parents to fully understand. Some of the most influential myths are:

**1) Untrue:** “Condoms are ineffective in preventing pregnancy STDs and HIV.”

**True:** Multiple sources of reliable, scientifically valid research demonstrate that condoms are highly effective in preventing pregnancy, STDs, and HIV. The Centers for Disease Control published an article in the August 6, 1993, issue of *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) about the success of condoms for the prevention of HIV and STD transmission. The CDC has also compiled a packet of condom information refuting misinformation about condoms. *The Truth About Latex Condom*, a new SIECUS Fact Sheet, addresses such issues as condom effectiveness, rates of HIV transmission between discordant partners when using condoms, and the rigorous standards to which condoms are held.

**2) Untrue:** “A Planned Parenthood survey shows that students who receive comprehensive sex education are more likely to become sexually active.”

**True:** The above false assertion was misconstrued from the findings of a poll conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in 1986. The poll asked teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 a variety of questions including whether they had ever taken a sexuality education course and whether the course included information about contraception. Courses which included a contraception component were labelled “comprehensive” even though comprehensive courses encompass many topics with contraception representing only one possible component. The poll also asked

whether teens were sexually active. However, the poll reported the results without controlling for age. Older teens are both more likely to have had sexuality education in school with a contraceptive component and are also more likely to have engaged in intercourse. Thus, while some people have misinterpreted the poll as showing that those who have had sexuality education including contraception as more likely to be sexually active, the poll actually shows no association.

- 3) **Untrue:** "Children who are given information about sexuality prior to the seventh grade will have their natural modesty about sexuality damaged."

**True:** The above idea is loosely based on a theory about latency that is explained in the writings of Sigmund Freud. His theory holds that young children experience a phase in their early development in which they are attracted to the parent of the opposite gender and that a resolution to this phase is followed by a period in which sexuality lies dormant or is latent (inactive) within the child. Modern psychologists strongly refute the idea of a latency period. Further, Freud himself advocated strongly for sexual information and education for school-aged children. He approved of "gradual and progressive course of sexual matters...at no period interrupted, in which the school takes the initiative."<sup>3</sup>

- 4) **Untrue:** "Abstinence-only programs have been found to reduce pregnancy rates."

**True:** The evaluation data that do exist for abstinence-only programs are greatly flawed. First, none of the evaluations for the most popular fear-based curricula (*Sex Respect*; *Facing Reality*; *Me, My World, My Future*; and *Sexuality, Commitment and Family*) included questions about teenage sexual behavior. Evaluation questions concerned only students' values and attitudes about sexuality. The literature shows that attitudes about a particular behavior do not necessarily determine a person's behavior. A person may fully understand the importance of using dental floss as a preventive health measure, but may still not implement the behavior of flossing his or her teeth before bed every night. Further, many of the evaluations do not make clear whether students were guaranteed that their answers would be considered confidential or anonymous. Without such a guarantee, students might skew their answers to try to give what is perceived as the "correct" response, or the one most acceptable to parents and teachers. The evaluations often word the questions so that students will choose the desired answer. A meta-evaluation of these programs is currently being completed by the American Psychological Association in conjunction with SIECUS.

#### **Who are the Opponents of Sexuality Education**

Critical distinctions must be made between individuals who deliberately distort information about comprehensive

programs and individuals who express a legitimate concern when they hear or read about such misinformation. In many communities, few people have a full understanding about what comprehensive sexuality education truly is. Parents have the right and the responsibility to find out what their children are being taught in school. However, often times it is easier to believe the arguments promulgated by opponents of comprehensive approaches than it is to investigate whether the accusations against comprehensive programs are true.

In some communities the opponents of comprehensive sexuality education have effectively framed the debate about sexuality education as a parental rights issue. However, it is very important for parents to know that proponents of comprehensive approaches have always looked to parents for input in developing curricula, in being a part of review committees, and in discussing the effectiveness of different approaches. Further, the proponents of comprehensive programs have advocated for "parental opt-out provisions" which allow parents to remove their child from any sexuality education program if the parents themselves prefer to provide this type of education at home. It is crucial not to let conservative groups hide behind the charge that caring parents who want to know more about sexuality and other education in the schools will be labelled quickly as censors by proponents of comprehensive sexuality education. The distinction between a parent rightfully interested in his or her own child's education and a parent who wants to restrict information from being taught to other people's children is an enormous one.

The good news is that many local communities have effectively blocked the adoption of fear-based programs by evaluating misinformation contained in abstinence-only programs. Refuting misinformation must happen on as wide a scale as possible. Utilizing local newspapers, cable-access station, radio shows, flyers, town meetings, and tabling in busy areas are some ideas for distributing accurate information about comprehensive sexuality education.

#### **There Is A Bigger Picture**

Most national Far Right organizations have complicated agendas that reach beyond sexuality education toward restructuring public education. Very often dismantling comprehensive sexuality education programs is merely the first, highly-sensationalized step in a more subtle agenda. Sexuality education, therefore, often serves as the focal point for effectively organizing and motivating like-minded people. In reality, the most widely censored programs in the 1992-1993 school year did not concern sexuality. Instead, they involved self-esteem programs in the public schools. Other programs that the Far Right has targeted for dismantling include drug and alcohol education programs; outcome-based education; school-breakfast and school-lunch programs; and matters concerning overall funding for public education. For example, the Far Right provided much of the impetus for the California voucher initiatives which, had they passed, would have provided public funds for religious and private school education.

With some battles gaining all the attention, opponents of comprehensive sexuality education often run quietly

for local offices such as school board, obscure local and county positions, or for leadership in local and state Republican party committees. Currently, individuals subscribing to the ultra-conservative agenda make up a solid majority in about a dozen Republican state committees, including those in California, Iowa, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.<sup>4</sup> Parents must learn to keep a watchful eye in their communities for the quiet work of the Far Right, as well as the louder debates which often concern sexuality education.

### Hot Spots Around the Country

A number of communities that have previously enjoyed solid support for comprehensive sexuality education have recently found themselves struggling to maintain sexuality education. The following is an update of certain communities from which important lessons can be learned:

**Michigan:** The Michigan Model for Health Education, a comprehensive curriculum for grades Kindergarten through 12th grade, covers such diverse topics as safety, first aid, nutrition, growth, development, substance use and abuse, personal health practices and family health. Recently this curriculum has come under fire by a small number of legislators and a few community leaders throughout the state. In October, 1992, the Michigan Senate Select Committee to Study the Michigan Model released a report charging that "because of the mixed message about pre-marital sex, the Michigan Model lessons result in increased adolescent sexual promiscuity."<sup>5</sup> No documentation of the connection between the school lessons and sexual behavior was offered. The report also found that "calm-breathing (a stress-reducing technique) could be hazardous to your child's health." It concluded that "the core problem facing Michigan schools is a moral one. All other problems derive from it."

Unfortunately, this report added fuel to the fire for local Far Right activists bent on implementing fear-based sexuality education in the schools. In Grand Blanc, Michigan, a number of school board members were elected by espousing the view that the Michigan Model ought to be replaced. Despite education about the flaws of various curricula, and solid work on the part of a committed group of parents and professionals, on November 1, 1993, the Grand Blanc school board ousted the Michigan Model. A new program will be instituted in this community which includes medical misinformation, gender bias, scare tactics, and lessons from the widely-known fear-based curricula, *Sex Respect* and *Teen Aid*. The new curricula is called *FACTS*.

**New Jersey:** In the Spring of 1993, a bill was overwhelmingly passed by the New Jersey House of Representatives requiring that these sexuality programs "stress abstinence." In December, 1993, the bill also passed the State Senate. Fortunately, on December 28, 1993, Governor Florio conditionally vetoed the bill citing concerns that local control over curricula decisions would be usurped by the bill and asked that certain passages of the legislation be changed.

A recent New Jersey poll entitled *Is Playing It Safe Unsafe?* shows tremendous public support for sexuality education including the teaching of topics that are often considered controversial.<sup>6</sup> Almost ninety percent of New Jersey residents polled favor offering sexuality education in junior and senior high schools, ninety-four percent approve of teaching HIV/AIDS prevention, and eighty-six percent approve of teaching about contraceptive methods and safer sexual behaviors.

Unfortunately, a number of districts have considered curricula such as *Sex Respect*, a program which was implemented in Morristown, N.J. A number of districts have approved the public-school use of *Sex, Lies, and the Truth*, a video produced by the Far Right organization Focus on the Family. The video uses catchy images and teen stars to communicate the idea that premarital sexuality leads to such disastrous outcomes as the inability to fully give oneself emotionally and sexually to a spouse. A review of this video is available from SIECUS.

**California:** Numerous controversies over sexuality education have taken place throughout the state of California, even though mandates for health education, HIV/AIDS education and recommendations for sexuality education are in place. For instance, Hemet, California continues to use *Sex Respect* despite growing public support for a more comprehensive approach. San Marcos continues to use *Me, My World, My Future* as a component of health education programs, and the Vista school board, which includes majority support for a Far Right agenda, recently began to review established sexuality education programs. Districts surrounding Hemet, such as the Corona-Narco school district, have managed to avert efforts to place fear-based education programs in the school and are at work implementing comprehensive programs with a strong focus on skills-building in order to postpone sexual intercourse.

**Massachusetts:** According to the *Boston Globe*, thirty-eight local groups have been established to oppose comprehensive sexuality education. Numerous communities such as Newton, have been pressured to adopt the fear-based AIDS education program entitled *Free Teens*. In Braintree, the school committee voted against implementing an HIV/AIDS education program because it was not abstinence-only, and a small, well-organized group swayed the advisory committee to adopt *Sex Respect* as the school curriculum of choice. Conversely, largely thanks to concerned and organized parents in Newton, opponents of comprehensive sexuality education were roundly defeated in the latest school board election. Those who were associated with Newton Citizens for Public Education, the most vocal group pushing an abstinence-only approach, lost by wide margins in the November election in Newton. Every school board member elected publicly supported comprehensive sexuality education.

The good news for parents is that — despite widespread community controversies — people have organized and been successful in determining what their children are be-

ing taught in schools. In communities where proponents of comprehensive programs fight back, comprehensive sexuality education programs are often protected and fear-based programs removed.

For instance, in Fountain Hills, Arizona, a curriculum committee suggesting three different fear-based programs was flatly defeated. It was the leadership of one school board member who had read critiques, researched litigation and shared information with colleagues, who was able to make a compelling case against the implementation of fear-based education. More comprehensive programs are being carefully explored for implementation in area schools. In Cabell County public schools in West Virginia, the board of education rejected fear-based programs after reading and circulating published critiques of the programs. Proponents of comprehensive education programs have managed to resist pressure to implement fear-based programs in Joplin, Missouri, despite the fear-based programming in surrounding areas like Carthage, Diamond, La Mar, and Golden City.

Communities which have exposed the agendas of Far Right school board candidates have also managed to keep many of them from being elected. An important case study showing the effectiveness of diverse organizing to prevent election of Far Right school board members is "The San Diego Model" available from People for the American Way [See resources at back of article for ordering information]. The recent elections in Newton and Falmouth, Massachusetts also show that candidates who avoid public forums and oppose comprehensive approaches often do not garner public support and are therefore defeated.

### Litigation

Some community members have taken legal action against fear-based programs by claiming that school boards who adopt fear-based curricula violate State law. Two recent lawsuits in Jacksonville, Florida and Shreveport, Louisiana, are described in the following paragraphs.

The Shreveport case, *Bettye Coleman et al. versus the Caddo Parish Board of Education*, involves the use of two fear-based curricula, *Sex Respect* and *Facing Reality*. The plaintiffs are parents and taxpayers in Caddo Parish who charged that the programs violated state law by teaching specific religious beliefs and medically inaccurate information, by requiring students to divulge personal information, and by offering counselling about abortion. Respect, Inc., the publishers of the curricula, intervened in the case by petitioning the court claiming to have a compelling interest in the outcome of the case. Therefore, they became defendants in the case as well. The judge found that certain passages did violate state law in each of the areas previously noted. Following the decision, the school board asked the court whether they could teach the program if the subject matter in question was omitted. The judge agreed to this proposal, and school board representatives ordered that a black magic marker be used to ink out the offending passages. However, in actuality, not all passages were deleted, since some of the passages appeared throughout the text. Additionally, a television crew filmed students holding books up to the light in order to see what was inked out with the black pen. The

plaintiffs then brought a contempt-of-court charge against the school board. In August, 1993, the Caddo Parish school board and its President were found to be in contempt of court. Both rulings are being appealed.

In Jacksonville, Florida, Planned Parenthood of North-east Florida in conjunction with a number of parents on behalf of their children, brought a case against the Duval County school board for implementing a junior high school curriculum published by Teen Aid, Inc. called *Me, My World, My Future*. They claimed that the curriculum violated a Florida law which requires that curricula for grades K-12 include accurate, complete, unbiased, and non-sectarian information. Teen Aid, Inc. intervened in the suit, revised the curriculum, and motioned that the case be dismissed. In September, 1993, the judge ruled not to dismiss the case, but to hear all of the arguments brought by the plaintiffs against the curriculum. In summary, the charges are that *Me, My World, My Future* includes medical inaccuracies, misleading information, and incomplete statements about vital medical and developmental information. The plaintiffs also charge that the school program fosters stereotypes based on race, gender, and economic status. Currently depositions are being taken.

### Common Ground, Compromise, and Context

Critical areas of agreement are commonly overlooked, but they do exist. It is true that both the proponents and the opponents of comprehensive sexuality education agree that teen pregnancy and STD, including HIV, transmission are significant problems facing youth today. These are critical issues that need addressing. Additionally, most people agree upon some of the core topics that must be discussed in sexuality education, including body image, anatomy, physiology and parenting skills. It is usually just a few controversial but essential topics over which there is disagreement. Some school districts mistakenly believe that compromise about these topics will avert controversy. However, not addressing abortion or masturbation or sexual orientation with correct information in unbiased lesson plans does not ensure the end of a conflict. In most cases, concessions are followed by additional demands to whittle away comprehensive sexuality education programs and replace them with fear-based approaches.

Research on education with the goal of behavior change shows that campaigns that focus on scaring young people out of unhealthy behaviors have little or no effect.<sup>7</sup> Further, the most effective way to change behaviors is to provide opportunities for:

- gaining knowledge;
- examining and modifying attitudes; and
- developing skills needed to implement behaviors.

Students also need to feel confident that their teacher is a reliable source of information on the topic. Students may be suspicious of teachers who refuse to answer a student's question or offer ideology and in the place of information. In some communities, focusing on general educational principles has led to greater consensus on the issue of sexuality education. Some communities have also used strategic plans to guide curriculum decisions.

Many school districts include overall goals for fostering decision-making skills or interpersonal skills. Evaluating sexuality education curricula with a standard paradigm of learning in mind may help the process along.

### Conclusion

Sexuality education continues to be an issue which engenders controversy throughout the country. Despite widespread public support for comprehensive approaches, opponents of these programs have managed to put tremendous pressure on local teachers, school administrators, and school boards to adopt abstinence-only, fear-based programs. Motivating a hard core of supporters on behalf of a comprehensive approach will be critical to maintaining effective programs or implementing accurate, effective education where it does not already exist. Sexuality education often serves as a wedge issue to motivate extremely conservative community members to get involved in the broader issues which undermine public education such as removing self-esteem programs, introducing prayer in the public schools, doing away with school breakfast and school lunch programs and establishing voucher programs which would provide tax dollars for private and religious school education.

Proponents of comprehensive sexuality education tend to be a much more diverse group of people with diverse viewpoints and varying opinions than do the fear-based education proponents. Some parents may have other concerns as well, such as protecting the environment, maintaining reproductive rights, securing civil rights for gay men and lesbians, battling sexism and racism in education, etc. People who are open to diversity also have different ideas for strategizing and achieving goals. The Far Right may be a more cohesive group of people who adhere strictly to a more simplified philosophy brought under the banner of family values. The key to developing effective, powerful, diverse coalitions at the national, state, and local level revolves around helping people to understand the connections between fear-based sexuality education and the broader concerns of reproductive rights, ending sexism, racial equality, understanding of sexual orientation, and maintaining public education. Once such connections have been made, the next challenge is to keep the group motivated over the long period of time that it will take to ensure that these issues are addressed.

Parents with school-age children make up just over 30% of families nation-wide. In order to show strong support for public school education programs, other community members must get involved because of their interest in fairness, accuracy, and effective education for all children.

### Author's References

- <sup>1</sup> Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. *SIECUS Position Statements*, 1991. This document is available by writing to Publications, SIEUCS, 130 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information see the National Guidelines Task Force. *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, K-12* (New York City: Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Freud S. The sexual enlightenment of children (an open letter to Dr. M. Furst, editor of *Sociale Medieme und Hygiene*) in *Collected Papers, Volume II* (London: Hugarth Press, 1907) pp. 36-44.

<sup>4</sup> Clarkson, Frederick and Skipp Porteous. *Challenging the Christina Right: The Activist's Handbook*. (Great Barrington, MA: Institute for First Amendment Studies, 1993), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Dinello et al., *Report of the Senate Select Committee to Study the Michigan Model*, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Firestone, W. et al. *Is Playing It Safe Unsafe? Family Life Education in New Jersey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, March 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Kirby D. Sexuality education: It can reduce unprotected intercourse. *SIECUS Report* Vol. 21, No. 2, 1993 pp. 19-25.

## For More Information

**The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2010 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-296-4021.** This organization is devoted to research on issues surrounding reproductive health. It is an excellent source of data on sexuality throughout the lifespan, including national data related to the onset of intercourse, pregnancy, contraceptive use, etc.

**Institute for First Amendment Studies, P.O. Box 589, Great Barrington, MA 01230; 413-274-4633.** The Institute publishes an excellent handbook including extensive background on prominent Far Right groups.

**People for the American Way, 200 M. Street, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-467-4999.** This national organization offers extensive information about Far Right groups especially regarding censorship attempts in the public schools. People for the American Way also publishes a report on the San Diego Model and suggests questions to ask school board candidates.

**Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 810 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019; 212-261-4633.** The education department of PPFA can offer assistance in organizing and supporting comprehensive sexuality education. Planned Parenthood also has local affiliates that can get involved in developing coalitions to support programs. Affiliates are also a great source of information about sexuality for local communities.

**ETR Associates, 4 Cabenero Street, Scotts Valley, CA 95066; 800-321-4407.** This publishing group offers successful comprehensive programs which include abstinence as a choice for young people. Two particularly good programs published by ETR are *Postponing Sexual Involvement* and *Reducing the Risk*.

**Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS), 130 W. 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036; 212/819-9770.** The Community Advocacy project at SIECUS offers technical assistance to parent groups organizing to maintain or to establish a comprehensive sexuality program in a local school district. SIECUS also offers *The Kit* to aid parents and others in organizing community members.

## What Can Parents Do?

- 1) Find out what sexuality programs are currently offered in your local elementary, junior high, and high school classes. If the programs are not familiar to you, request to see the materials. Materials are usually made available on site at schools as well as in some public libraries.
- 2) Investigate what types of committees exist to review and recommend school curricula. If you are interested in serving on the committee, let that be known to whomever appoints the committee (e.g., school board members, superintendent, principal). Committee work can be time consuming, but open-minded, intelligent, and dedicated people are often urgently needed to accomplish such work.
- 3) Develop a coalition of parents as well as professionals interested in educational issues such as family-life education, self-esteem programming, censorship prevention, Head Start programs, school nutrition, and separation of Church and State. Many coalitions may already exist that can be tapped for membership and suggestions. Look to AIDS coalitions, gay and lesbian coalitions, and health collectives for members and for technical assistance.
- 4) Offer critiques of weak sexuality education programs based on principles of effective education. For example, do programs offer students the opportunity for interactive, non-didactic learning? Are the educational strategies relevant to the students in the community? What skills are developed by the curriculum? Is the information provided accurate and up-to-date?
- 5) Attend curriculum committee and school board meetings whenever possible. Get to know school administrators, teachers, and school board members. Be available to offer support when controversy does arise.
- 6) If you are a teacher as well as a parent, keep a list of parents and students who can speak about the effectiveness of your family life education lessons. If you are a proponent of comprehensive sexuality programs, let teachers, administrators, school nurses and other relevant players know. Offer to speak on behalf of the program or to put your support in writing.
- 7) Call SIECUS for technical assistance. SIECUS staff members are available to discuss specific community controversies and to offer suggestions for dealing with difficult situations.
- 8) Order the *Community Action Kit*, published by SIECUS in April, 1993. The Kit provides materials which may be helpful in community organizing to support sexuality education. Kits may be purchased by sending \$29.95 to SIECUS. The Kit includes two publications of particular interest to parents—the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, K-12* and *Winning the Battle*.
- 9) Remember that your children's health and happiness is important and that you can play a vital role in making sure that they grow up to be sexually responsible adults.

### NEW SIECUS PROGRAM

#### Pre-Kindergarten Guidelines for Sexuality Education

Sexuality education is a lifelong process that begins at birth. As children grow, some of the most important things they learn have to do with their sense of themselves as sexual beings. However, all too often, parents and early childcare providers and educators lack the training, skills, and comfort to provide this critical foundation for future sexual learning. Therefore, SIECUS, along with a national task force of experts, will develop a basic framework for early childhood sexuality education with support from the Dyson Foundation. This model for preschool sexuality education will help inform parents and early childcare providers about the sexual development of young children.

# RUNNING FOR SCHOOL BOARD

## Parental Advice

**Joan Dentler**

Parent  
Brownsville, Texas

Last Spring, I decided to run for my local school board. I had always been active in my community. For instance, I was on the board of several different organizations; I had a child in the public school system; and I am by profession an education director at Planned Parenthood. My reason for running for school board were many, but the strongest were my children. I had kept two of my kids in private school because the public school in my area had a dismal record for test scores and drop-out rates. I decided it was time to stop blaming everyone else for my local district's poor performance and to try my own hand at fixing the problem. I figured that even if I was not successful at my bid for a seat on the school board, at least I gave it an honest shot. And frankly, I knew that even if I didn't win, I would feel more comfortable knowing I had tried when I voiced my complaints about the school.

Not surprisingly, my campaign turned into an open debate about my professional career. As one of my opponents put it, "Is someone who works for an organization that 'encourages promiscuity among young people' fit to sit on the board?" Fortunately, the voters in my district were confident that because of my profession, I would be more than qualified to fix what they perceived of as the problem with the school district's mission. I won 45% of the vote in a four-candidate race.

In my brief tenure (now nine months) I haven't had to tackle the kind of problems I've seen broadcast on the nightly news: pregnant cheerleaders, guns in the hallways, sexual harassment. I also have not been on the rampage my opponents grimly predicted, spearheading condom distribution in grade schools and offer-

ing abortions on the school campus. Mostly, I've faced the mundane, but important issues of setting school taxes, strategizing to improve test scores, addressing employee grievances, and deciding what to name the new middle school. This is indeed the main business of school boards.

Improvement, I've discovered, is slow. As with most institutions, the bureaucracy resists rapid change. But still, I find it an exciting time to be involved in public school education and my children's lives. Issues such as school finance, teacher competence, and districting are on every parent's mind whether or not they have children in public schools.

Many parents and community members are active in their local schools. They volunteer at events, chair committees, testify before the school board. I am a sound witness to the influential role that a parent can play — whether as advocate and policy-maker — simply by getting involved. Whether the issue is comprehensive and sound sexuality education throughout the grades or teacher competence, now is the time to stop complaining about what "they" are doing and figure out instead what "we" need to do to make things better for our children.

## International Program Director Wanted

SIECUS is seeking a program director for its new international initiative to develop country projects that will adapt the "Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality education. The ideal candidate will have:

- a Masters degree;
- international family planning, sexuality, or health education experience;
- 3-5 years progressively responsible management experience;
- language fluency highly desirable;
- excellent writing, speaking, and publication skills.

**SIECUS**  
**International Position**  
130 W. 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10036

## SIECUS Position Statement on Parents

SIECUS affirms that parents are -- and ought to be -- the primary sexuality educators of their children. SIECUS supports efforts to help parents fulfill this important role. In addition, SIECUS encourages religious leaders, youth and community group leaders, and health and educational professionals to play an important role in complementing and augmenting the sexuality education received at home.

# HOW TO BE AN ACTIVIST

## For The Sake of Your Own Children

Renee Hillman

Parent

Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania

Activism was not my plan in life. However, early in 1992, I witnessed a rapid erosion of my school district's long-standing dedication to quality education. Suddenly, the members of my community seemed more interested in extremist attitudes and secret agendas. I knew that as a responsible person, it was time to get involved. Nobody has exclusive ownership of identities like "parent," "taxpayer," "concerned citizen," or "pro-family advocate." Much to the dismay of the people who abuse these titles in order to fulfill hidden political agendas, I was willing to claim publicly that I fit all of the above descriptions.

Looking back over the past year, I am most regretful that my involvement in fighting to keep sexuality education in my children's school was initially a defensive reaction to an attack that had already started to occur right in my back school yard, so to speak. My advice to parents and other educators is to be alert, find out what is happening in your children's school district, and be pro-active, offensive players. If you like what is happening in the classroom then tell the school board, the superintendent, and other community leaders. If you do not approve of the direction your child's education is taking, you have every right to complain, to get involved, and see that changes are made. It is important that you be involved, before you end up like me, turning around to find that extremist leaders had started to take over with unacceptable plans for my children's education.

The reality is that in many local school districts across the country, comprehensive educational programs of all sorts are being attacked. We are observing, however, that when the mainstream is informed about the extremist agenda, they come out in full force to defend their children's right to a free education and a value system that encourages openness not narrow-mindedness. As a result, more people have become involved in positive participation in their children's lives.

During my struggles, I discovered that my biggest supporters were other parents — all of whom were also taxpayers, concerned citizens, and pro-family advocates. It is most important to educate these supporters about the issues that are being used to take school districts down. It is important to obtain information about what is happening around the country, how the ultra-conservative movement operates, and who the leading extremist players are, and to share it with supportive parents in the community. It is often difficult to address

the denial that many parents (including initially myself) share. "How could this be happening in our school district?" many of my supporters asked. But in time, I was able to gather the evidence and convince them that what we had most feared had already "hit home." I asked my supportive community friends to pass along the information to their friend, neighbors, clergy, and family. Most importantly, I asked them to get involved *in the classrooms* that taught the kinds of curricula that were being opposed by extremists.

It is important to be up-to-date on the selection of books, teaching materials, and curricula being used in the classroom. Also know the policy that is in place for complaints and follow it to the letter. If you are able to garner support with a small group of community members, call yourselves a Review Panel, and try to include a broad representation of the community. Do not be afraid to include members of the community who have extreme opinions. Most often, the extremists on either side of the issue are outvoted, especially if their arguments are unreasonable or unverifiable. Every piece of information you plan to use in public must be well researched and documented.

Often, it turns out that those who at first appear to be extremists, actually have very good intentions. Sometimes susceptible parents get used like pawns in a political struggle, especially when they are given false or distorted information. Do not waste your time trying to convince those community members who insist that their view is the only one. The best way to avert such a no-win situation is to organize public discussions concerning the issue that is up for debate, whether it be self-esteem programs, school-lunch programs, or comprehensive sexuality education. It is a good strategy to have parents with complaints against the current curricula come to the school and review the classroom teaching materials. Often you will find that these parents have been told what to say and once they see the actual material their children are using, they realize they have been given false information and will drop the complaint.

You can draw on numerous resources from the community to win this battle. Explain that you expect parents to visit the classroom on a regular basis and to get involved. Senior citizens are often tremendously supportive and great resources. Developing a partnership at all levels of education may be key to preventing the future devastation of good programming in your school district.



*From the Executive Director:*

## TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY IS NOT ALWAYS EASY

### A Word of Encouragement to Parents

Debra W. Haffner, MPH  
Executive Director, SIECUS

As I reviewed the other articles in this issue of the *SIECUS Report*, I was struck by the range of values that the authors thought important to hand down to their own children. It reminded me that the work of sexuality educators is to help parents understand their *own* values in order to communicate them to their children. It is not my role — nor the role of any other educator, for that matter — to convince other parents what they *should* teach their children. We must remember that our job is to enable parents to express their own ideas and concerns in a way that their children will understand.

The range of values presented in this issue makes a convincing case for school-based comprehensive sexuality education. I am sometimes asked if I think my children need sexuality education in school. I always answer that they do because schools can play an important supplemental role in providing information even in homes where sexuality education is thorough. If it is a parents job to provide their children with values, it is the school's job to provide them with opportunities for learning in a peer environment led by specially trained teachers. School programs will allow my children to learn that some families hold different values about sexuality issues, hear what their friends think about important issues, offer other input which might help clarify their own feelings and attitudes, as well as provide a forum for questions that they may not want to raise at home.

Additionally, in today's climate, sexuality education is a challenge for any parent, and the schools can help support parents in their role as the primary sexuality educators of their children. As many readers already know, I am the proud parent of an eight-year-old daughter and a six-month-old son. I am one of those very lucky people who have a loving family, healthy children, and work that I love and find deeply meaningful. I am also one of those parents who can honestly say that all of my other achievements dim when compared to the wonder and blessing of my children.

Ten years ago, when I was a community educator and before I had children of my own, I taught classes to parents to learn how to be sexuality educators for their own children. I realize differently now what a difficult reality it is to be the sexuality educator of one's own children. Of course, non-parents can do a wonderful job teaching such

classes, but the actual task for the parent is more difficult than I realized. I am continually awed by the responsibility and commitment required to provide children with values about sexuality.

Over the years, I have been determined to practice what I have preached concerning how to talk to my own daughter about sexuality. I have helped her learn the names of all of the parts of her body, taught her about privacy, answered her questions as honestly as I can, sought out the teachable moments in life, the golden opportunities that naturally arise, like discussing the plots and characters of her favorite T.V. shows, especially when they deal with sexuality and relationships. Additionally, she has accompanied me to marches and rallies, has listened to me give speeches, and just this past holiday weekend, helped me wrap presents for people living with AIDS. My spouse and I have worked hard to create a home where openness is valued, communication is emphasized, parenting is shared equally, and work and family commitments are kept in balance.

Nonetheless, I have found that it is not so easy to be the "primary sexuality educators" of our children. I am increasingly struck that the media has assumed the role of primary sexuality educator for children. Talk shows, soap operas, sit-coms, dramas, and even cartoons provide information to our children about sexuality on a daily basis. I was thrilled that Sesame Street finally introduced a strong female Muppet this season, as my family re-entered the world of early morning public television with the birth of our son. I was less than excited, however, this summer as we watched talk shows while I nursed the baby only to discover the appalling values which are transmitted about sexuality on the television. At last count, there were 17 television talk shows on the air; sexuality is often one central topic, and it is often covered in a manner I consider inappropriate for my 8-year-old's viewing.

Like most parents, I have been bowled over at questions about sexuality asked loudly in the grocery store. I have found myself at a loss for words when a question I never expected popped up. Indeed, there have been times when I have responded in ways that I later regretted. For instance, this past fall, I struggled with how to respond to my daughter when she asked questions about the Bobbit case and then about Michael Jackson. I know

if it is difficult for me to answer these questions, it must be daunting for other parents without the benefits of my professional training, access to resources, and familiarity with the subject matter. I can honestly say to parents: It is o.k. to be embarrassed, uncomfortable, and to realize that you don't have all the answers to the questions your children might ask you about sexuality. I too have felt embarrassed and at times at a loss for words.

I often need to remind myself that sexuality is only one of the difficult but important topics that I can share with my children. For instance, I have felt most challenged by my daughter's questions about the homelessness, violence, and death that she witnesses on the news and in the world around her. The "sex questions" at least usually have factual answers. But questions like, "Where do people go when they die?" and "How do I know for sure that I or one of my friends won't be kidnapped?" are much more difficult to answer. Children's question about sexuality often have simple informational answers that can be found in books, at the library, or by asking a professional sexuality educator.

Gladly, I have observed the fruits of our labor in my daughter's attitude and knowledge about sexuality. She seems to be more comfortable with her body and more accepting of diversity than most of her friends. Sometimes I have seen her struggle with this. She often comes home angry over inaccurate statements about HIV/AIDS and gay men and lesbians that she has overheard on the playground. Often she says she doesn't feel comfortable correcting her peers or engaging in a discussion about these topics. She has told me that she tells people that I direct SIECUS but doesn't explain what it means because "some kids think the word 'sex' is funny." She worries about fitting in already, and we haven't even forged through puberty or adolescence yet.

The birth of my second child this summer poses a new challenge: how to raise a sexually healthy son in our soci-

ety. I often pause to remember the question Stone Phillips of *Dateline* asked me during a television interview about the Spur Posse, the group of adolescent boys who were alleged to be raping young girls in the community for sport. "How would you feel if your son were a part of that group?" he asked. I answered that I hope that by raising my son with a sense of respect for himself and for others, we would never have to face such a problem. I am concerned, though, about how to raise a boy to be confident in himself as a male in our culture without being "macho." At the moment he is an infant, with needs that know no gender. I am sure that my family and I will learn as we go, especially when he enters the world outside of our home.

What do I want my children to know? As small children, I want them to know it is appropriate to talk about sexuality and ask questions in our home. I want them to think of their body as a wonderful gift, and to feel good about themselves as male or female persons in the world. I want them to realize their full human potential and understand their rights and responsibilities. I also want them to grow into adolescents who appreciate their own bodies, interact with both genders in respectful and appropriate ways, practice effective decision-making, communicate effectively, and live according to values of honesty, equity, and responsibility. I want them to become adults who can express love and intimacy appropriately, develop and maintain meaningful relationships, and celebrate their sexuality throughout their adult life.

Shortly before my son was born my daughter asked me if I was going to teach the new baby all about sex the way I had done with her. Holding my breath a little, I asked her if she thought that was a good idea. "I think it's great that we've always talked about sex," she responded, smiling. "Even if I don't tell most of my friends what you do for a living."

### **The More Things Change....**

In 1969, the SIECUS Report, then entitled, SIECUS NEWSLETTER, published an article entitled "Parents' Rights in the Sex Education Controversy" by board Member Carlfred B. Broderick, Ph.D. The article asserted that SIECUS..."affirms the right and the obligation of parents to educate their own children as to the so-called "facts of life" and, more especially, as to the meaning and significance of these facts in their lives." The article continues as follows:

One of the great controversies surrounding sex education today is whether some parents have the right to prevent other parents from seeking the assistance of the school and other agencies in educating their children in various aspects of human sexuality. We affirm the rights of parents to receive cooperation and assistance from the larger community in the education of their children in this and other areas. There are both preventive and educative aspects to this right. In the preventive aspects, parents have a right to the assistance of other social agencies in efforts to protect their children from...media for the exploitation of sexual themes and from misrepresentation and misinformation. SIECUS supports the efforts of responsible citizens and organizations in this area and especially the assumption of responsibility for self-regulation on the part of agencies, producers, distributors, and the mass media.

In the educative area schools, churches, and other public and private agencies have the responsibility to develop programs calculated to meet the following criteria: a) they introduce information and concepts at ages and in ways that are consistent with the best professional opinion and with the community's sense of what is appropriate; b) they explicitly respect the sexual and moral values of the home from which each child comes; c) they protect the privacy and integrity of each child while at the same time providing opportunity for meaningful dialogue among students on questions of mutual concern; d) they provide the commitment and support to obtain well-qualified teachers and counselors.

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY AND OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

## A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography For Parents

SIECUS affirms that parents are, and ought to be, the primary sexuality educators of their children. This bibliography is designed for parents seeking materials to help carry out this important role. The books listed cover a range of topics that parents may wish to discuss with their children, including the physical, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality. These resources address the concerns of both children and adolescents, recognizing that each stage of development (infancy through puberty to late adolescents and early adulthood) presents a new challenge for learning about sexuality.

Both parents and children are faced with a range of concerns related to human sexuality: anatomy, puberty, sexual behavior, love, relationships, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases, to name just a few. Parents choose to discuss these topics in different ways, with different styles, and using different materials. Some seek material to support particular religious, moral, or ethical views. Others stress the medical and physical aspects of human sexuality. And still others use fiction or current events as catalysts for discussion. Many types of materials are available,

and SIECUS encourages parents to look for resources that speak to their children's needs and reflect their parenting styles.

The listed resources may be available in your local bookstore or public library, and are good complementary resources to the books listed in "Growing Up: A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography of Books About Sexuality for Children and Adolescents." The publisher can be reached directly by using the information which follows each listing. SIECUS does not sell or distribute any of the listed publications, except SIECUS publications, which are noted. However, most of the materials in this bibliography are available for review by members at SIECUS' Mary S. Calderone Library, which can be contacted at the address below.

Copies of this bibliography can be purchased from SIECUS' Publication Department as follows: 1-4 copies/\$2.00 each, 5-49 copies/\$1.75 each, 50-100 copies/ \$1.50 each, 100+ copies/ \$1.00 each. Write to: SIECUS, Publications Department, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 2500, New York, NY 10036; 212/819-9770.

### SEXUALITY AND CHILDREN

#### **BABY BRENDON'S BUSY DAY: A SEXUALITY PRIMER**

*Donna A. Jennings, Ph.D.*

A brightly illustrated book for one of the earliest sexuality talks parents will have with their children. This book includes labeling sexual parts of the body, identifying infant development, illustrating family affection, and presenting both mothers and fathers as equal caregivers for children. 1993, 30 pp., \$15.95, plus postage and handling.

*Goose Pond Publishing, Inc. P.O. Box 14602, Tallahassee, Florida 32317; 904/385-6659.*

#### **CHILDREN AND THE AIDS VIRUS: A BOOK FOR CHILDREN, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS**

*Rosemarie Hausberr*

The text of this resource is cleverly written in large print for younger children and includes in-depth discussions

for older children and adults in smaller print at the bottom of each page. It explains facts about HIV/AIDS and its transmission. 1989, 48 pp., \$5.95.

*Clarion Books, 52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017; 800/225-3362.*

#### **WHEN SEX IS THE SUBJECT: ATTITUDES AND ANSWERS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

*Pamela M. Wilson, Ph.D.*

For teachers and parents, this book concerns itself with addressing the questions of children age ten and younger. The psycho-social development and learning process of children is discussed. Guidelines to help parents respond accurately and comfortably are offered. 1991, 101 pp., \$14.95.

*Network Publications, P.O. Box 1830, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1830; 408/438-4081.*

#### **DOES AIDS HURT?**

*Marcia Quackenbush and Sylvia Villareal*

The authors' intention in writing this book is "to offer hope in a world that has no guarantees," and "to support parents, teachers, and others in guiding children through life with one less fear." They emphasize that a basic understanding of human sexuality is essential to learning how to prevent HIV infection. The book offers ways of facilitating such learning in children ages ten and younger. 1988, 149 pp., \$14.95.

*Network Publications, P.O. Box 1830, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1830; 408/438-4081.*

#### **SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN**

*Virginia Lively and Edwin Lively*

This resource helps to clarify issues in the sexual development of children. An appropriate book for both parents and teachers, the book is especially helpful

for answering questions, focusing discussions, and providing information. 1991, 198 pp., \$16.95.

*Delmar Publishers, 2 Computer Drive, West, Box 15015, Albany, NY 12212; 518/459-1150.*

**WHEN SEX IS THE SUBJECT: ATTITUDES AND ANSWERS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

*Pamela M. Wilson, MSW*

This handbook offers that the key to effective sexuality education for young children is not just what you say, but how you say it. The author gives age-appropriate answers to children's common sexuality questions; essential ground rules for establishing a positive learning environment; and more. 1991, 102 pp., \$14.95.

*Network Publications, P.O. Box 1830, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1830; 408/438-4081.*

**SEXUALITY AND ADOLESCENTS**

**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO TEENAGE SEXUALITY**

*Jay Gale*

This guide discusses the role of parents and family in an adolescent's sexual education program and provides guidelines about how to talk to teenagers. The topics covered include the biology of maturation and the special situations and needs that adolescents must confront. 1989, 242 pp., \$9.95.

*Henry Holt & Co., 115 West 18th Street, New York, NY 10011; 212/886-9200.*

**GETTING YOUR KIDS TO SAY "NO" IN THE 90'S WHEN YOU SAID "YES" IN THE 60'S**

*Victor Strasburger*

This is an intelligent, well-written book emphasizing active, involved parenting. The parenting challenges particular to the 90's are discussed, along with strategies to meet them. 1993, 286 pp., \$11.00.

*Fireside Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10021; 800/223-2348.*

**PUBERTY: AN ILLUSTRATED MANUAL FOR PARENTS AND DAUGHTERS**

*Angela Hynes*

A readable book designed to help parents create and maintain good communication with their daughters. The author is careful to explain physiology and physical changes throughout pu-

berly. 1990, 147 pp., \$6.95.

*Tor Books, 175 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10010; 212/388-0100.*

**MORE READINGS FOR PARENTS**

**AN EASY GUIDE FOR CARING PARENTS: SEXUALITY AND SOCIALIZATION, A BOOK FOR PARENTS OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HANDICAPS**

*Lynn McKee & Virginia Blackledge*

This book addresses the social needs of children with mental handicaps and other developmental challenges. The authors advise parents to play a crucial role in the education of their children concerning sexuality. Discussion topics include growing up, responsible sexual behavior, masturbation, social life, sexual orientation, fertility and birth control, sexual abuse, and marriage. 1986, 56 pp., \$7.25 + postage and handling.

*Planned Parenthood: Shasta Diablo, 1291 Oakland Blvd., Walnut Creek, CA 94596; 510/935-4066.*

**MOM AND DAD HAVE QUESTIONS TOO: USING ANATOMICAL DOLLS FOR SEX EDUCATION IN THE HOME**

*June Harnest*

This booklet gives an overview of child development to help parents understand what to expect as a child grows. The anatomical dolls are used as a tool for communicating and creating a positive attitude toward bodies and sexuality. 1988, 19 pp., \$3.00.

*Teach-A-Bodies, 3509 Acorn Run, Fort Worth, Texas 76109; 817/923-2380.*

**MOTHERS OF INCEST SURVIVORS: ANOTHER SIDE OF THE STORY**

*Janis Tyler Johnson*

Questions like "How could a mother not know?" and "Why didn't she do something when her child was being incested?" are addressed in this groundbreaking new book. The author describes her interviews with mothers whose daughters were sexually abused either by step fathers or biological fathers, and proceeds to challenge assumptions held by researchers and mental health professionals. The book carefully examines the assumptions held about the role of mothers in families and presents an argument against mother-blaming. 1992, 162 pp., \$9.95.

*Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 601 N. Morton Street, Bloomington, IN 47404-3797; 812/855-4203.*

**NOW THAT YOU KNOW: WHAT EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY**

*Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward*

This important book addresses the issue of parenting when a child or adult-child has come out as gay or lesbian. Updated in 1989, it includes a chapter about HIV/AIDS. The book offers sensitive and thoughtful perspectives on family, sexuality, and gay and lesbian issues. 1979 (updated 1989), 276 pp., \$8.95.

*Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 465 S. Lincoln Drive, Troy, MO 63349; 800/346-8648.*

**RAISING A CHILD CONSERVATIVELY IN A SEXUALLY PERMISSIVE WORLD**

*Sol Gordon and Judith Gordon*

Written with warmth, concern, and intelligence, this revised edition includes chapters on accepting one's sexuality, becoming an askable parent, self-esteem, and the role of schools in sexuality education. 1989, 224 pp., \$8.95.

*Fireside Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10021; 800/223-2348.*

**SEXUALITY EDUCATION FOR TODDLERS TO YOUNG ADULTS: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS**

*James Kenny*

Written from a Catholic point of view, this is a sex positive guide for parents about how and when to offer education about the physical aspects of human sexuality. The author presents Catholic views on contraception, abortion, and homosexuality, and urges parents to accept and love their children no matter what and who they are. 1990, 65 pp., \$4.25.

*St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic Street, Cincinnati, OH 45210; 513/241-5615.*

**SEX IS MORE THAN A PLUMBING LESSON: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SEXUALITY EDUCATION FOR INFANTS THROUGH THE TEEN YEARS**

*Patty Stark*

This book stresses the complex nature of human sexuality and the parent's role as a sexuality educator. Written clearly and directly, it encourages parents to communicate with their children about sexuality. 1990, 203 pp., \$12.95.

*Preston Hollow Enterprises, Inc., P.O. Box 670935, Dallas, TX 75367-0935; 214/368-7201.*

## CLASSICS AND FAVORITES

*The following books are out of print, but SIECUS staff members felt they were important enough to include. The books may not be found in book stores, but a local library will have them on the shelves.*

### TALKING WITH YOUR TEENAGER: A BOOK FOR PARENTS

*Ruth Bell and Levi Zeiger Wildflower*

This highly recommended book for parents deals with the challenge of raising teens to be healthy, responsible adults. While covering life changes from puberty through adolescence, it addresses teenagers' emotional health and sexuality, and the communication skills parents must have to cope with their children's dilemmas and decisions. Random House, 1982, 127 pp.

### THE FAMILY BOOK ABOUT SEXUALITY

*Mary S. Calderone and Eric Johnson*

First published in 1981, this straightforward, comprehensive guide to human sexuality has been expanded and thoroughly updated to contain new information about AIDS, adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, homosexuality, and the sexuality of older adults. Contains a reading list, arranged by age group. Harper and Row, 1989, 288 pp.

### STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART: HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TEENAGERS ABOUT LOVE AND SEX

*Carol Cassell*

This practical guide is for parents about how to help children become healthy and sensible sexual persons. It includes a section entitled "Practical Sessions," where parents can compare their responses to various situations with those of the author. Fireside Books, 1987, 254 pp.

### RAISING SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN: A LOVING GUIDE FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND CAREGIVERS

*Lynn Leight*

Designed to help parents discuss their values when educating their children about sexuality, this guide provides a sexuality inventory for parents and explains the sexual development of

children from infancy to adolescence. Rawson Associates, 1989, 284 pp.

### PARENTS TALK LOVE: THE CATHOLIC FAMILY HANDBOOK ABOUT SEXUALITY

*Susan K. Sullivan and Matthew A. Kawiak*

This handbook is recommended for Catholic parents at home and for discussion groups in parish settings. Each of the nine chapters concludes with a list of questions for discussion. Paulist Press, 1985, 164 pp.

## ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS

### THE CENTER FOR EARLY ADOLESCENCE

*D-2 Carr Mill Town Center, Carrboro, North Carolina 27510; 919/966-1148.*

This organization offers information services. Staff will answer questions, give referrals, and recommend resources.

### GROWING UP HEALTHY HOTLINE

*New York State Council on Children and Families; 800/522-5006.*

Parents can call to request information packets about talking to their children about sexuality.

### THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME....FOR SEX EDUCATION

*Planned Parenthood Association of Lane County (PPALC) 134 East 13th Avenue, Eugene, OR 97401; 503/344-1611.*

PPALC offers this set of newsletters with age-appropriate information, communication hints, and suggests resources for parents. The newsletters can be photocopied and distributed to other parents, teachers, and sexuality educators.

### TIME TO TALK

*Organon, Inc.; 800/692-TALK*

Parents can call with questions or to request an information booklet about talking to their children about sexuality.

## PAMPHLETS

### How to Talk to Your Children about AIDS

*SIECUS*

Designed to help parents talk with their children about HIV/AIDS, this pam-

phlet offers basic information about AIDS and guidelines appropriate for specific age levels. 1989, 16 pp. One free copy with self-addressed, stamped, business envelope, 2-49 copies/\$1.00 each, 50-100/\$.80 each, multiples of 100/\$65.00 per hundred, multiples of 1,000/ \$400.00 per thousand.

*Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. 130 West 42nd Street, 25th Floor, New York, NY 10036; 212/819-9770.*

### Oh No! What Do I Do Now? Messages About Sexuality: How to Give Yours to Your Child

*SIECUS*

Eight hypothetical situations are offered to help parents analyze feelings, formulate responses, and become more relaxed when discussing sexuality with their children. 1983, 24 pp. 1-4 copies/\$2.25 each, 5-49 copies/\$1.75 each, 100+/\$1.00.

*Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. 130 West 42nd Street, 25th Floor, New York, NY 10036; 212/819-9770.*

### Positive Parent/Child Communications

*The Bureau for At-Risk Youth*

This pamphlet discusses several different forms parent/child communication can take, including nonverbal, verbal, communication by example, and listening as communication. The need for communication is stressed, guidelines and pointers are given. 1992, 15 pp., \$1.95.

*The Bureau for At-Risk Youth, 645 New York Avenue, Huntington, NY 11743; 800/99-YOUTH.*

### Growing Up: A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography of Books About Sexuality for Children and Adolescents

*SIECUS*

This is a list of important books about sexuality in relation to development, including an individual's thoughts, experiences, knowledge, ideas, values, and imagination from birth through late adolescence.

*Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. 130 West 42nd Street, 25th Floor, New York, NY 10036; 212/819-9770.*

This bibliography was compiled by  
Evan Harris, Library Assistant

For more information SIECUS members can contact the library Monday - Friday, 12 - 5 pm at 212/819-9770.

# • BOOKS & VIDEOS • BOOKS & VIDEOS •

## **EVERYBODY'S DOING IT: HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR TEENAGER'S SEX LIFE (AND HELP THEM SURVIVE IT TOO)**

Jay Warren and Andrea Wiedenkiller  
New York: Penguin Books, 1993, 233 pp., \$10.00 paperback.

There were times while reading this book when I thought, "The more things change the more they stay the same." Other times, I was struck by the complexities that young people must face today. Then I found myself thinking, "Things were never like this when I was young." I grew up in the 1940s, raised my children in the 1950s and 60s, and all along thought my own generation was more enlightened than the previous ones. My mother told me about menstruation when I reached puberty, and I was the one who passed the information on, so other girls my age around the neighborhood would know what was happening to their bodies. Their mothers didn't tell them. I was surprised to find that the authors, a husband and wife team raised in the 1950s, were also raised without any information, and later, as parents, were admittedly shocked to learn that their teenager was having sexual intercourse. The authors attempt an honest exploration of sexuality and problems that must be tackled among the different generations.

Unfortunately, the book is aimed almost exclusively at mainstream middle- and upper-class college-educated parents. For example, the authors illustrate an important point about the pressured on young people as follows: "Don't forget the pressure you felt to...be in the right clique...make decisions about your future...take all those college entrance exams, to get into the college of your choice, to qualify for a scholarship."

It could be argued that this population of educated adults is the most likely to read a book about educating teenagers about sexuality issues. However, there are plenty of parents who have never gone beyond high school, who live in crowded urban areas, work in blue-collar jobs or get along on welfare, who are literate, informed and concerned about their teenagers' sexual life. As a professional family therapist, I have many such parents in my practice and am always on the look-out for reading material suitable for their needs as well.

The authors of *Everybody's Doing It* explain that they have transcribed and used "endless hours of tape" from inter-

views. This reliance on verbatim quotations at times, however, is distracting, running-on at times for pages. I found myself skimming large sections in search of more succinct material. Nonetheless, it must be stated that on the whole this handy book will be readable and useful for many parents. The authors speak in the vulnerable voices of the struggling parents in a blended family with two teen-age daughters. They are real, human, and compassionate.

Most notable is a section called "Days of Future Passed," in which the authors tell each other personal stories about growing up. Sharing these memories with children is indeed a unique and valuable gift. The reader also comes to see the two authors and parents grow and solidify their views about the fact that their sixteen-year-old is having sex. Also worth mentioning are the two appendices, "Sharing information about Sex and Sexuality with Children and Teens" and "Communicating with Teens about Sex." These are succinct and rich with information. The main point of the book is an important one: "Our best bet — the only bet — is to teach them to be responsible. To teach them to protect themselves. If we really love them and care about their well-being, we should let them know how to have emotionally and physically satisfying sex lives, either by discussing this with them or by pointing them to the books and people that will tell them."

I, for one, say amen to that.

*Reviewed by Ruth Lampert, M.A. Ms. Lampert is a psychotherapist, sexuality educator, and the founding director of Family Kaleidoscope in Los Angeles, California.*

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**SCHOOL HEALTH: POLICY AND PRACTICE: Committee on School Health American Academy of Pediatrics** Philip R. Nader, Editor  
Elk Grove Village, IL, 1993, 405 pp., \$7.35 paperback.

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*School Health: Policy and Practice* is an invaluable resource for both new and experienced school health professionals and administrators. If a school district adheres to the principles outlined in this book and uses the additional cited resources, a strong, effective, and comprehensive school health program (CSHP) should ensue. The editor cleverly de-

vises a three part structure for the book including a rationale for establishing a school health program in an educational setting; specifics about implementing such a program including the special considerations for pre-school populations, special education students, the crucial components of health education and services, and establishing a healthy environment; and finally specific school health problems commonly encountered in an educational setting.

The complexity of more recent problems faced by educators and students are explored: violence, HIV/AIDS, medication administration, and special nursing care needs of health-impaired students. Alternative approaches to management and prevention of these problems are offered. The recurring themes of this book include the need to make sure policy is written down and clearly defined; the benefits to gaining health professionals from the community to act as advocates; and the difficulties in facing barriers and a lack of support for CSHP.

Interestingly, environmental health, traditionally defined as the physical environment, has recently expanded to include both the emotional and psychological environment. This means that the expectation of teachers and parents imposed on students is now included as environmental health. An in-depth exploration of this broadened definition would have been useful. The book is not intended to be a stand-alone publication. Its review of diseases and health problems is limited, and some of the information is already outdated. However, *School Health* is a valuable reference offering important information and insights.

*Reviewed by Jane Guiles, R.N., Ph.D., CHES, Coordinator of the Central New York AIDS Regional Training Center, Syracuse, New York.*

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**HIV/AIDS AND OLDER ADULTS**  
American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) 1993, 90 minutes, AARP, 601 E. Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049

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*HIV/AIDS and Older Adults* is a video of an AARP conference presentation. Unlike many conference proceedings that have been recorded, however, these are dynamic and truly hold the viewer's interest. The tape is also high quality, so that the only focus is on program content.

The first portion of the video consists of three presenters who offer information about HIV/AIDS in a lecture format. Barbara Barnett from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provides background information about the epidemic. Her lecture includes historical events, statistical data, and modes of transmission. Ms. Barnett opens her remarks by sharing her personal experience as a mother who has one son who is gay and second son who has died of AIDS-related illness. The HIV/AIDS history she offers is quite brief and focuses on events such as the naming and renaming of the disease; CDC surveillance activities; the FDA approval of the ELISA tests; the advent of AZT and other nucleoside analogues; the deaths of Ryan White and Rock Hudson; and Magic Johnson's public announcement of his HIV status. Ms. Barnett also emphasizes that HIV/AIDS affects everyone. She stresses that older adults are affected when they become caregivers of HIV-infected children and grandchildren. She encourages her audience to become informed and to be as active as they can in order to educate others about the disease. One drawback with Ms. Barnett's presentation is that she fails to emphasize that older Americans may also be at risk for becoming HIV-infected.

The second presenter is Joe Izzo, a clinical social worker from the Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, D.C. His presentation picks up where Ms. Barnett's leaves off. He provides information about the psycho-social issues of HIV/AIDS for older adults. His points include the multi-generational impact of

the disease, personal loss that older adult experience, and the risks of becoming HIV infected. He states that by remaining ignorant, older adults are at risk for becoming infected and receiving inadequate services. He asserts that older Americans currently do not receive accurate and complete information about HIV/AIDS prevention because of the misconceptions about the behaviors of older people. He addresses these misconceptions and discusses in more detail why older adults are at risk for HIV transmission through sexual behavior or needle sharing. Mr. Izzo briefly discusses the manifestations of HIV, and concludes by encouraging AARP to continue to educate its members, the general public, and the professional community about HIV/AIDS in older adults.

The third presenter is Ernie Pozzi from the Family AIDS Support Project from the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG). He describes the support of families which is given through the national organization, which works to build a bridge between gay and lesbian communities and heterosexuals. The purpose of P-FLAG is to end the alienation that gay and lesbian individuals often face in a homophobic society and to provide an opportunity for family members and friends of gay and lesbian people to sort out their feelings and explore their attitudes. The Family HIV/AIDS Support Project, founded in 1987 to help parents of gay sons with HIV, has been expanded as a resource to bring together all families and communities affected by HIV/AIDS regardless of

"transmission mode." For more information, call 1-800-4FAMILY.

The second portion of the video consists of presentations from three members of P-FLAG's Family AIDS Support Project. Their powerful and moving presentations offer a good balance to the earlier lecture format. Sarah Reed is a mother whose son is living with HIV infection. Terry Taylor has had a brother and her father die from AIDS-related conditions. Bob Benov has had two sons die from AIDS. Each of the speakers offers personal testimony about their experiences as caregivers for family members living and dying with AIDS. All three emphasize the importance of being informed, and the need for family members to support loved ones who are living with HIV/AIDS.

Watching a video in this format is not without its drawbacks. Viewers must have patience to sit through all of the opening remarks. Some viewers may become impatient with uninterrupted lecturing, and ninety minutes may seem somewhat long. However, *HIV/AIDS and Older Adults* has many high-lights. It is an appropriate resource for adults of all ages, and can be used by educators as a discussion starter. Most importantly, the information addressed by the video may not be commonly discussed by professionals or the general public. This one is highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Tina Utley Edwards,  
Planned Parenthood Association,  
Mohawk Valley, Inc., Utica, New York.*

## **BY THE YEAR 2000: ALL PARENTS WILL RECEIVE ASSISTANCE IN PROVIDING SEXUALITY EDUCATION TO THEIR CHILD(REN)**

Parents are the first and primary sexuality educators of their children. Parents provide children with their first understandings of gender roles, relationships, and values, and their first sense of self-esteem and caring. Infants and toddlers receive this education when parents talk to them, dress them, show affection, play with them, and teach them the names of the parts of their bodies. Older children continue to learn as they develop relationships within their own family and observe the interactions around them. In this way, parents set the framework for all other sexuality education efforts. Most young people look to parents as their most important source of information about sexuality, and more than two-thirds of young people have talked with their families about sexuality issues.<sup>1</sup>

Eighty percent of parents agree that it is their responsibility to provide sexuality education to their children, yet few actually do so. Only 25% of adults in the United States report that they learned about sexuality from their mothers or fathers. More than 80% of parents say they would like help in providing this information to their children.<sup>2</sup> Many parents report that they are uncomfortable discussing such explicit sexual issues as intercourse, masturbation, homosexuality, and orgasm with their children, and that they would welcome assistance in doing so. In fact, some of the very topics which parents feel are most important to discuss are the ones they most often avoid discussing with their children.

1. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. American teens speak: Sex, myths, TV and birth control, *Planned Parenthood Federation of America*, New York, September/October 1986.

2. General Mills, Inc. *Family Health In An Era of Stress*. Minneapolis, MN: General Mills, 1978.

Excerpted from *Sex Education 2000: A Call to Action*, SIECUS, 1990.

# Public Policy Update

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## LESBIANS AND GAYS IN THE MILITARY?

For many, the debate about "gays in the military" was a loss for sexual orientation rights. The President may have done more than any other Commander in Chief, but not enough to make good on the Administration's historic announcement in January that the discriminatory policy banning open gay and lesbian personnel from service would end. After months of national debate, media stories, and Congressional hearings, president Clinton released on July 19 his "Don't Ask, Don't Tell; Don't Pursue" compromise policy. The policy eliminates sexual orientation as a factor in determining eligibility for military service and yet retains prohibitions on homosexual conduct. Gays, bisexuals, and lesbians will be permitted to serve as long as they do not engage in sexual activities or disclose their orientation. The military can also still investigate soldiers when there is "credible" evidence, and can discharge people for engaging in homosexual conduct, even if it is private and off-base between consenting adults. The Joint Chiefs of Staff statement on the President's policy read: "The issue of homosexuals in the military has been a difficult one. I believe our new policy will protect the interests of all without damaging the cohesion of our forces." It was only after the president's new policy was announced that the Department of Defense finally released its \$1.3 million Rand Corporation study which found no basis for exclusion of gays and lesbians from the military, urged even-handed administration of sexual misconduct rules for heterosexuals and homosexuals, and stated that good leadership could handle any potential negative consequences of a changed policy. A federal district court ruled in October that the new military policy was unconstitutional. The court also issued an unusual order to stop the ban nationwide, setting the stage for eventual review by the supreme court.

## NO MEDICAID ABORTION-FUNDING

The Senate voted in late September to continue to prohibit funding abortions for women from low-income communities covered under Medicaid, except for cases of rape and incest. This policy, commonly known as the Hyde amendment, has been in place for a number of years. Pro-choice forces felt some momentary hope this summer when the Senate Appropriations Committee eliminated the ban from its version of the Labor-HHS Appropriations bill. Earlier this summer, the House of Representatives voted to continue the funding ban. A coalition of 130 organizations was formed this year, entitled the Campaign for Abortion Reproductive Equity (CARE), to mobilize for restoration of Medicaid coverage for abortion services for poor women and others who receive health care from the federal government (i.e., federal employees, military personnel, federal prisoners).

## "CHOICE" AND HEALTH CARE REFORM

Final language in the Administration's health care reform package included coverage for "pregnancy-related services." Section 1116 of the bill consists of "Family Planning Services and Services for Pregnant Women, including: 1) voluntary family planning services; 2) contraceptive devices that may only be dispensed upon prescription and are subject to the approval by the Secretary of Health and Human Services under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act; and 3) services for pregnant women." Reproductive rights proponents are working toward the inclusion of infertility and genetic-screening services, as well.

## FEDERAL ROLE UNCLEAR ON HEALTH EDUCATION

In education reform, the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" is currently moving through Congress, but without an explicitly defined place for health education. The House of Representatives has passed the bill and is awaiting Senate action. Goals 2000 would codify national education standards developed last year by the nation's governors (including former Arkansas Governor Clinton and the now Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, who was the governor of South Carolina). In crafting Goals 2000, the governors came up with a very short list of subjects that students would be expected to master. The list did not include health education. During this year's legislative debate over the Goals 2000 bill, several additional subjects have been added, including foreign languages and arts. Both Congress and Secretary Riley have been unresponsive to the addition of health education. They state that health issues are adequately addressed through other goals, including the readiness-to-learn and drug-free schools goals. In a letter to Secretary Riley this Summer, SIECUS joined the National School Health Education Coalition (NaSHEC) in pushing for inclusion of comprehensive school health education, including sexuality education on the Goals 2000 subject list. The White House reportedly wants to keep Goals 2000 intact as is. SIECUS and NaSHEC efforts are ongoing to see that health and sexuality are included.

## POSSIBLE SEXUALITY EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Among SIECUS efforts to address the federal leadership void on sexuality education is the development of legislation to provide funding of comprehensive sexuality education demonstration grants programs. Since the 1980s, the federal role has been disturbingly limited, except for funding of "fear-based" education through the Title XX Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). AFLA was created in response to conservative demands for a "counter-balance" to Title X family planning contraceptive services. Over the years, the Title XX program has funded parenting care programs for adolescent mothers and "fear-based" preven-



tion education programs. In August, a revised Title XX bill, the Mickey Leland Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenthood Act, was introduced by Representative Nancy Johnson (R-CT) as part of the Women's Health Equity Act. It will be introduced as a freestanding bill soon. The bill's primary focus is on adolescent pregnancy prevention and parenting instruction for pregnant adolescents. Missing from the bill, however, were components that would have outlined sexuality education initiatives. Efforts to revise the Mickey Leland bill are ongoing through the Adolescent Sexuality and Reproductive Health Working Group, which includes SIECUS, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, and over 20 other national organizations.

### TRACKING THE BATTLES

Odds are that many SIECUS Report readers reside in communities currently undergoing volatile debates about sexuality education in local schools. As of August, SIECUS has documented organized opposition to comprehensive sexuality education in over 140 communities around the country. Opposition efforts are typically led by proponents of "fear-based" education who offer their programs as alternatives to comprehensive sexuality education instead of outright opposition to any sexuality education. Fear-based education -- like *Sex Respect*, *Facing Reality*, and others -- is characterized by the omission of critical information, medical misinformation, religious

bias, sexism, racism, and homophobia, according to a SIECUS content analysis. Other fear-based goals and strategies are passage of legislation requiring abstinence-only "fear-based" education and election of ultra-conservative candidates to local school boards. Fear based education has been introduced in New Jersey, Alabama, Massachusetts, Georgia, and Louisiana. In Massachusetts alone, SIECUS is aware of 37 communities where opposition groups have formed to thwart the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education and HIV/AIDS education. Key battles have moved into the courts in Louisiana and Florida. If you are aware of controversies over sexuality education, please contact SIECUS' community advocate, Leslie Kantor at 212/ 819-9770.

### EXPANDED FEDERAL ACTION ON HIV/AIDS

A coalition of national organizations including the National Association of State Boards of Education and SIECUS, is formulating a policy statement to submit to Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, urging a greater role for the Department of Education in HIV/AIDS prevention for school-aged youth. The document includes an outline of the impact of HIV/AIDS on youth; a mandate for national leadership from the Department of Education; development of an Action Plan on HIV/AIDS education in schools; and attention to HIV/AIDS prevention in the health care reform plan.

## For help in Talking with Your Children about Sexuality contact these organizations about their programs and publications:

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| Academy for Educational Development                              | National Council of Negro Women   |
| American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry              | National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA                                     |
| American Academy of Pediatrics                                   | National Council on Family Relations  |
| American Association for Counseling and Development              | National Education Association  |
| American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy             | National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association                              |
| American Association of School Administrators                    | National Organization for Women, LDEF/PEER  |
| American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists | National Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting                               |
| American College Health Association                              | National Urban League   |
| American Red Cross   | National Women's Political Caucus   |
| American Youth Work Center                                       | Nurses Assn. for the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists                  |
| Association for Advancement of Health Education                  | Onice of Prevention   |
| Association of MCH Programs                                      | Parents Without Partners  |
| Boys and Girls Clubs of America                                  | Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.  |
| Camp Fire, Inc.  | Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.   |
| Catholics for a Free Choice                                      | Society for Adolescent Medicine   |
| Center for Early Adolescence                                     | Society for the Scientific Study of Sex   |
| Center for Population Options                                    | The Coalition on Sexuality and Disability, Inc.   |
| Children's Defense Fund  | Union of American Hebrew Congregations  |
| Council of Jewish Federations                                    | United Church Board for Homeland Ministries   |
| Episcopal Church Center  | United States National Committee for the World Organization for Early Childhood Education |
| Family Service America   | YMCA of the USA   |
| Girl, Inc.   | YWCA of the USA   |
| International Planned Parenthood Federation                      | Zero Population Growth  |
| National Association of Community Health Center                  |   |
| National Association of School Nurses                            |   |
| National Council of Jewish Women                                 |   |
| National Council of La Raza                                      |   |

This list was compiled in 1993 by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. as a part of the National Family Sexuality Education Month Coalition, supporting parents as the primary sexuality educators of their children.