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SEXUAL PLEASURE

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SEXUAL PLEASURE HAS CENTRAL PLACE
IN THE HUMAN POTENTIAL

Mac Edwards

I cannot remember ever having had a sexuality education class when I attended high school in Virginia in the early 1960s. I also cannot remember ever having talked to the minister of my church about sexuality-related issues. And I never talked about sexuality with my mother or father. Everything that I learned came from books and talks with friends. I don't think this was unusual for my generation.

In truth, my most valuable learning experiences about sexuality-related issues have come during my seven years here at SIECUS. I was hired to edit the *SIECUS Report* because I was a journalist and writer, not because I was a sexuality educator or sexual health expert. So, through the years, I have learned a lot from our staff as well as from those who have written articles for us.

This *SIECUS Report* on "Sexual Pleasure" has been particularly valuable in that respect. In fact, I feel that the information is so important that I hope you will take the time to read every article and use the information to help others appreciate the importance of discussing sexual pleasure in all sexuality education curricula.

PLEASURE AS VALID SUBJECT

Dr. Stella Resnick, a sex therapist and author, writes in her article "Sexual Pleasure: The Next Frontier in the Study of Sexuality" that happily, things are changing. "Pleasure has been discovered as a valid subject of systematic investigation," she explains. "Probably a major factor precipitating this new attitude is the wealth of data accumulated over the past three decades showing a direct correlation between pleasurable experiences and good health."

She concludes by saying that science is just beginning to investigate the value and role of pleasure in enjoying a healthy sexuality. "As therapists, we can provide more comprehensive sex therapy by not just working with our clients to explore their sexual problems and pains but also to help them thoroughly investigate their sexual pleasures."

Then Joe Fay, director of the Pennsylvania Coalition to prevent teen pregnancy, says that sexuality educators need to broaden their perspectives to include sexual pleasure as part of the larger issue of body awareness. "With this change, we can more easily recognize how our culture's neglect of sexual pleasure is but one part, albeit a very important part,

of our general alienation from the body that gets to the very heart of the question: "What does it mean to be fully human?"

We have long misunderstood, exploited, and reduced the concept of pleasure to mere hedonism, he concludes. When we treat it as a sacred gift rather than a frivolous pursuit, we will begin to recognize its central place in humanity's potential.

Next, author and journalist Judith Levine writes in "Promoting Pleasure: What's the Problem?" that pleasure has been virtually expurgated from sexuality education curricula and that it has become a "hidden discourse."

"If sexual expertise is expected of adults, children must get a chance to understand the rudiments," she says. "If educators want to be credible about sexual responsibility, they have to be forthright and explicit about sexual joy and pleasure."

PLEASURE AS
A HIDDEN SUBJECT

Dr. Leonore Tiefer, the noted clinical psychologist, activist, and author, writes in her article titled "Pleasure, Medicalization, and the Tyranny of the Natural" that the neglect of pleasure as a subject in current writings is the legacy of a puritanical and naturalistic sex-as-function, sex-for-reproduction model that is still popular in medicine.

This, she says, is partly because pleasure, being subjective, is conceptually complex and difficult to study. Mostly, however, she says it is because sex researchers and educators still find sexual pleasure a politically dangerous topic. She points out that, at the same time, the larger culture is busy 24 hours a day, seven days a week distributing overblown promises of sexual pleasure through consumerist films, popular music, advertising, and, in the latest twist on advertising—the promotion of sexopharmaceutical drugs like Viagra.

"If sex researchers and educators neglect the study of sexual pleasure," she says, "the public will continue to be vulnerable to shame and disappointment as well as gullible to every new Madison Avenue promise-pusher."

Next, Dr. Bill Stayton, who is a professor of sexual health at Widener University in Chester, PA, as well as an ordained Baptist minister, writes that the current focus on finding sexual meaning in our time is

a reaction of humans striving to understand the nature of their sexuality.

“Many are fearful of implications,” he says. “Maybe one of those implications is that they will discover sexual pleasure in all the dimensions of their lives. That will happen when they join their sexual selves with their spiritual selves and seek appropriate ways of expressing that pleasure in all their relationships.”

WASHINGTON ACTION

This issue of the *SIECUS Report* also includes a Policy Update by SIECUS Public Policy Director Bill Smith.

In his article, “Welfare Reform’s Provision for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs,” he updates us on Congressional action behind the reauthorization of this federal program that began in relative secret five years ago.

As most educators now know, the abstinence-only-until-marriage programs supported by the federal government and the Bush Administration cannot teach preventative measures such as condom and contraceptive use or positive aspects of sexuality such as pleasure and desire.

Sadly, these programs must stick to a strict eight-point definition which includes teaching teens that sexuality activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful physical and psychological effects.

Everything about the program is in conflict with the discussions in this issue that point to the need to develop a sexuality education curriculum that is sex positive and that includes discussions on sexual pleasure.

Washington’s actions show us that we still have a long way to go to develop sexuality education curricula that will lead toward the creation of a sexually healthy America.

TEENS TALK ABOUT SEXUAL PLEASURE

These teen writers are editorial board members or national correspondents for *SEX,ETC.*, a national newsletter and Web site that is written by teens, for teens, about sex, pregnancy, condoms, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, and relationships.

SEX,ETC. is part of the National Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project developed by the Network for Family Life Education at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick. Readers are encouraged to visit *SEX,ETC.* at www.sxetc.org.

Love, passion, desire...sex to me is the end product of these ingredients. Speaking as a virgin, I physically do not know what sexual pleasure with another being feels like. But I do know that it is something sacred to me that I want to share with someone who is very special to me. It’s the ultimate form of love and emotion.

Writing love notes, whispering sweet nothings, and kissing are ways affection is conveyed in relationships. And they’re amazing stimulants. Sex means the most when the feelings inside a person (not just lust, but love and caring) become so overwhelming that the only way to express them is physically.

Sex is the ultimate expression of devotion and affection. It’s comparable to fireworks. You wait for them all year long and on July 4th, you get the most breathtaking display you’ve ever witnessed. And the wait is worth it. If you watch them all the time, and they aren’t as anticipated, they won’t evoke as much pleasure. Likewise, sex, if waited for, could probably be the most spectacular display of fireworks, if it’s with the right person.

—Lily, 17

No matter what walk of life one may be from, as human beings we instinctively gravitate towards pleasure and are repelled by pain. Pleasure arises in various forms, but as a teenager one comes across pleasure of a sexual nature fairly often. Even a fairly obstinate observer of an average high school would see that sex and relationships are a very popular topic of conversation.

After being exposed much of my life to portrayals of sex through the media, school, and now from peers, it seems that the only rational conclusion to make is that sex is very pleasurable. If it were not, then people would not dare to take such risks of unwanted pregnancy and disease just to have it.

I personally believe that sexual pleasure is a mental and physical satiation of our desires, and it is unhealthy to repress these feelings as we are indirectly told to do so from a young age. As we are sexual beings by nature, it is healthy to fulfill our desires, so long as we are responsible in our actions.

—Kedar, 17

PLEASURE IS ULTIMATE SECRET OF SEXUALITY

Tamara Kreinin, M.H.S.A.

As I began to think about this issue of the *SIECUS Report* on “Sexual Pleasure,” it occurred to me that as a society our relationship with any kind of pleasure, especially physical, is fraught with numerous contradictions.

We strive for pleasures yet are made to feel guilty when we achieve them. We bombard our young people with images of pleasure yet teach them only about those they should avoid. We keep pleasure as the ultimate secret of sexuality yet assume that when they are old enough (and in a relationship we approve of) all people will be able to have it.

Ours is a society based largely on the idea that new and better products will bring us pleasure and happiness.

If we are rich enough and thin enough we can spend our days in luxurious rooms eating bon bons and having massages. Advertisements tell us that, in the meantime, we can experience some luxury by driving the newest sports car, eating the latest decadent chocolate-covered ice cream bar, and swathing ourselves in the latest fashions.

At the same time, the average consumer is made to feel guilty for enjoying any of these pleasures. For, if we’ve done so, we have clearly spent too much money and gone off our diet. And for every pleasure we indulge in, we are reminded that much of the world’s population goes without simple necessities. Is there any way for us to feel pleasure without simultaneously feeling guilt?

TEACHING GUILT

It is, in fact, this guilt that we teach our young people. Instead of teaching them about things they can do to take pleasure in this world and even in their bodies, we spend much of their education telling them that those things that might bring temporary pleasure are ultimately harmful and should be avoided. We teach our children to avoid drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. And unfortunately, we often add sexuality to that list.

While alcohol abuse, drug use, and smoking are things we never want for our children, sexuality is a natural and healthy part of life. While adults may disagree about when it is appropriate for young people to explore this part of their lives, almost all parents want their children to have a healthy adult sex life.

Still, too often, schools fear teaching teens about the positive aspects of sexuality. Teachers and administrators ask themselves: Might even mentioning that sexual acts feel good give teens newfound incentive to try them? Do

discussions on sexual pleasure implicitly condone those enjoyable behaviors? Will parents complain that the school is encouraging students to experiment? And even though research confirms that education about sexuality does not encourage sexual activity, teachers continue to censor themselves when it comes to the topic of pleasure.

So sexual pleasure is rarely named and, instead, those lessons that do focus on sexuality concentrate on teen pregnancy, HIV, and STDs. Students quietly learn the same lessons that they did about illegal and otherwise harmful substances: This might feel good temporarily but it is dangerous, harmful, and you won’t be able to control it.

BUT HOW DO WE LEARN?

Teaching young people about sexuality is usually a responsibility shared by schools and families. When it comes to sexual pleasure, however, families are not necessarily addressing what schools are leaving out.

Being asked to share personal details about their own sex life is an almost universal fear among parents when discussing sexuality with their children. And children, who by nature don’t want to see their parents as sexual beings, also often fear being confronted with such information. Few topics have the potential to bring up such discomfort.

Yet if families and schools fail to address the issue, the media and advertisements become the only venue for information about sexual pleasure. Once again the message is that if you are rich enough and thin enough (or buy a particular product), sex will be perfectly choreographed.

Parents need to counter these unrealistic notions of sexual pleasure with honest discussions because only they can impart their own values and those of their communities. And it is our responsibility as sexuality educators to help them do this. We must help them acknowledge the potential for discomfort and assure them that it is possible to discuss sexual pleasure without discussing their own sexual behavior.

Our young people deserve open and honest messages about all aspects of their sexuality. We need to incorporate positive messages about sexuality with public health concerns about STDs and adolescent pregnancy.

In order to be able to provide this, we need to first challenge ourselves to resolve our contradictions regarding pleasure. Only then will we be able to raise a generation of sexually healthy adults.

SEXUAL PLEASURE: THE NEXT FRONTIER IN THE STUDY OF SEXUALITY

Stella Resnick, Ph.D.

Sex Therapist and Author
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In the related fields of sex therapy, sexuality education, and sexological research, the pleasurable qualities of sex have been almost completely disregarded in every way except cautionary.

The literature is rich with regard to sexual dysfunction, disease, abuse, addiction, and unwanted teenage pregnancy. But the pleasures of fulfilling sexual expression seem relegated to the realm of pornography or erotica—smut or art, depending on the eye of the beholder.

The science of pleasure would appear to be an oxymoron, with any sort of pleasure—sexual or otherwise—traditionally deemed unworthy of serious study.

PLEASURE DISCOVERED

Happily, things are changing. Pleasure has been discovered as a valid subject for systematic investigation.

Probably a major factor precipitating this new attitude is the wealth of data accumulated over the past three decades showing a direct correlation between pleasurable experiences and good health.

In the relatively new science of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) there is now substantial evidence to demonstrate that a wide variety of pleasures can boost immunity and extend longevity.

Feeling hopeful or confident, being hugged, getting massaged, making love—or even just daydreaming about doing so—all have been shown to have a profound effect on the ability to resist or recover from illness and to mend after surgery. From an increased count of disease-fighting white blood cells, to a slower heart rate, to the release of endorphins and hormones that can regulate and balance every system of the body, research shows that feeling good is good for us.¹

This is particularly true when it comes to sexual pleasure. With all its inherent opportunities for cardiovascular exercise, gratifying emotional connection, touch, playfulness, release of tension, and moments of sheer ecstasy, good sex can enhance physical fitness, strengthen the heart, and reduce stress.² On an emotional level, recent research shows that people with fulfilling sex lives tend to be less anxious or depressed and have greater self-esteem and better marriages than those who say they are sexually dissatisfied.³

This article will first offer a comprehensive view of pleasure and then, more specifically, of sexual pleasure. From there, it will examine some ways that people hold back sexually

from feeling as good as they can and will offer an effective therapeutic approach for enhancing sexual pleasure. Finally, it will glance at the significance of making room for sexual pleasure across the life span.

WHAT IS PLEASURE?

A regrettable result of our Victorian and Puritan pasts and the current climate of mistrust of physical pleasure is that we do not generally have an adequate lexicon for describing what it feels like to feel good.

In my office, when I ask clients in pain what they are feeling, they have no difficulty finding words to describe their distress—they may say they are feeling tense, angry, anxious, resentful, lonely, guilty, or depressed. And then they have plenty to talk about. But if they are not in pain, they usually say that they are okay. And that's it. As though only negative feelings count.

On the contrary, the right word clarifies a feeling, makes the unconscious conscious, and reinforces pleasure pathways, making a repeat more likely. I usually ask patients who say that they are okay, "Okay what? Relaxed, energized, curious, calm, amused? What does feeling good feel like? What are you doing that's working?"

It pays to have a vocabulary for good feelings. The better we can describe an experience, past or present, the more aware we can become of its dynamics and the more deliberate we can be in shaping it to our liking.

The same is true for sexual pleasure. Sexual activity is often viewed in just two states—intercourse and orgasm. It's as though pleasure were on a toggle switch: getting it on and getting it off. The more aware we become of the wide spectrum of pleasures that make up sexual expression, the more charted the terrain—and the better we can explore the territory.

AN EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

The dictionary defines pleasure as the "feeling of enjoyment." While happiness is more about a positive state of mind, pleasure is always physical.⁴

If we look more closely at what actually takes place within the body, phenomenologically, we can see that pleasure is a visceral, body-felt sense of well-being that says "Whatever it is you are doing, keep doing it."

Pleasure is felt as sheer energy, an authentic enthusiasm that spontaneously propels us forward, drawing us to

something or someone. We feel excited. Even when the source of the pleasure is mental and intellectual—like a good book or a stimulating conversation—the experience is a pleasure because of the sensation of inner activation in a relaxed and open body.

Freud originally defined pleasure merely as the absence, or alleviation, of pain. Until brain research identified pleasure centers in the limbic system, medical researchers believed that only pain was well represented physiologically while pleasure was more diffuse.⁵

We now know that feelings of enjoyment have brain and neural centers directly associated with them. More specifically, feelings like love, altruism, bonding, and sensory and sexual pleasures are all linked to pleasure centers in the limbic system, an area of the brain that helps to maintain homeostasis and is also associated with memory, emotion, and the ability to form loving attachments.

Biochemically, pleasure is linked to the release of a variety of neurotransmitters and hormones such as endorphins, dopamine, phenylethylamine, oxytocin, and serotonin.⁶

The autonomic nervous system, with its complementary sympathetic and parasympathetic branches, also plays a major role in the experience of pleasure and pain.

Put simplistically, the sympathetic branch is linked to feeling threatened, the triggering of the fight-or-flight stress syndrome, and the secretion of adrenaline and other stress hormones. The parasympathetic branch is associated with tension-release and replenishment of energy once the danger has passed. Autonomic balance involves a calm in both segments and a resulting positive state of quiet alertness. Sexual activity is associated with a firing in both branches, where high activation coupled with dilation allows for the maximum experience of pleasure.

Internally as well as externally, we contract in pain and expand with pleasure. Feelings of pain cause the heart and other internal organs to constrict, muscles to tense, blood pressure to build in the tightened vessels, breathing to become labored, and discomfort to grow.

Conversely, feelings of pleasure relax the muscles, and, with the parasympathetic system firing, the heart, viscera, and musculature also relax. The heart beats slowly and steadily, blood pumps through open arteries and veins, and the breath slows and becomes more rhythmic. The sensations associated with these internal events make pain inherently punishing and pleasure intrinsically rewarding.

There is no direct research on the psychoneurobiology of pleasure development in infancy and early childhood. Yet, the extensive neuroscience now accumulating in the area of attachment theory shows that, in the moments after birth and continuing for the first 18 months of life, the infant's brain is literally shaped by how much the primary caretaker, usually the mother, can play intuitively with, and enjoy, her baby. The

part of the brain most affected by eye contact, and the warmth, empathetic holding, and playful interaction between mother and child is the right hemisphere and limbic system. These areas are critical for an infant to grow into an adult who can feel secure, have empathy, bond with others, handle stress, and actually enjoy pleasure and positive affects.⁷

Studies in child development have traditionally explored the childhood traumas that can lead to adult disturbance but have offered little in the way of providing any understanding of the basic building blocks of human pleasure.

After more than 25 years of research into the topic of pleasure, I have identified eight categories of pleasure that appear immediately after birth, and at developmentally strategic junctures during infancy, childhood, and adulthood, which are critical sources of nourishment for humans to live healthy and fulfilled lives. The data from the multidisciplinary research—from neuroscience to PNI to public surveys—clearly show that each of these positive inner states contributes its own particular brand of vitality, provides both emotional and physical benefits, and continues to nourish individuals on a very fundamental level throughout the life span.⁸

As I conceptualize it, these eight core pleasures begin with the most *primal* pleasure of letting go and “just being,” move through the pleasures of *pain relief* (being soothed and comforted), *play* (humor, movement and vocalization), the *mental pleasures* (intellectual and aesthetic stimulation), *emotional pleasures* (all variations on a theme of love, like gratitude, courage, and faith), the *sensual pleasures* (taking delight in seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and imagining), the *sexual pleasures* (involving a spectrum of arousal that runs from interest, to desire, erotic love, lust, passion, orgasm, and ecstasy), and finally the *spiritual pleasures* (a deep sense of being a part of something good that is larger than oneself). Each of these core pleasures can also be eroticized and serve to intensify any sexual encounter.

Most importantly, pleasure is a completely subjective experience—the individual is the ultimate authority. No one can impose on anyone else what should or should not feel good—it either does or it does not.

What draws us to another person, how we like to be touched, what makes us laugh, or what entices our mind are all very personal. That means that any pleasurable experience, particularly a sexually pleasurable experience, puts a person in touch with his or her most authentic nature.

WHAT IS SEXUAL PLEASURE?

The ability to derive pleasure from sexual activity is always a key feature of any definition of healthy sexuality. Yet what exactly does that entail?

Though orgasm is typically seen as the big pay-off in sexual contact, the magnitude of the release is completely dependent on the intensity of the excitement. On the most

fundamental level, then, the scope of sexual pleasure is essentially a function of arousal. With the first stirrings of erotic interest, the genitals begin radiating a warm glow that, under the best of circumstances, spreads throughout the entire body. When a sexually excited individual is with a partner he or she also loves, the heart is enlivened as well. At its height, erotic excitement can potentially charge every centimeter of the body from head to toe with vibrant energy.

When sexual pleasure is seen through the lens of getting it on and getting it off, sexual activity becomes completely goal-oriented, moving along a specific and often ritualized trajectory sometimes known as “formula sex”—foreplay, penetration, male ejaculation, and occasional female orgasm.⁹ On the other hand, when sexual arousal is allowed to build more slowly, a greater variety of pleasures are accessed, arousal can become more nuanced, release can be more exquisitely explosive, and the entire experience can become richer and more meaningful.

We can see how—whether when self-pleasuring or with a partner—each of the core pleasures can augment sexual pleasure.¹⁰

Primal pleasure is the essence of all sexual pleasure. It is the basic enjoyment that comes with relaxing, letting go of resistance, breathing and opening as excitement builds, and taking delight in the present moment.

Pain relief. We now have substantial evidence that sex relieves pain.¹¹ When lovers massage and stroke one another they are not only being sexually inviting but they are also soothing each other’s body from the stresses and tensions of the day, helping to make each other more receptive to pleasure.

Play. Sexy playfulness that has warmth and a sense of humor, that inspires smiles and even laughter, can create sexual interest and change a non-sexual situation into a sexual one. Flirting and seductiveness can lighten the heart and infuse magic and sweetness into an ordinary day or evening.

Mental pleasures. Sex can be boring when there is no real contact between lovers who are mentally in their own world. But when lovers can look into each other’s eyes and talk sexy, maybe even share a fantasy or describe their erotic sensations, sexual activity can stimulate mind as well as body. Sexual intrigues and scenarios, real or pretend, are often used to stir up feelings of lust.

Emotional pleasures. Sexual excitement is generally most passionate when there are strong feelings of romantic love for the partner. Expressions of love and affection can ratchet up the thrill of intimate contact. Low levels of anger, guilt, shame, or fear can also have the effect of an aphrodisiac.¹²

Sensual pleasures. Sensuality is well recognized as a source of sexual pleasure. While the emphasis is typically on touch, excitement also grows with taking pleasure in the other senses. The intimate smell and sight of the other, the taste of their kisses, the sound of their breath and sighs all

contribute to enhancing desire and making the encounter more passionate.

Erotic pleasures. Under the best of circumstances, as lovers avail themselves of the variety of pleasures their intimate connection allows, eventually manual stimulation, sensitive oral sex, or skilled intercourse can bring on an orgasm, the explosive release that is typically experienced as the utmost sexual pleasure. Often orgasm signals the end of sexual contact. However, for some individuals, continued focus and activity can bring multiple orgasms where each release is more intense and exquisite than the preceding.¹³

Spiritual pleasures. While spirituality and sexuality are often separated in Western culture, both qualities can interrelate and under the right conditions, give rise to the transcendent experience of ecstasy. Melting into one another, and losing any sense of a separate self, lovers may feel transported into a profound spiritual and mystical union that is sometimes called sacred sex.¹⁴

Obviously, a multitude of delights make up the complex experience that people think of simply as sexual pleasure.

ELUSIVE SEXUAL PLEASURE

What individuals or couples seeking therapy for a sexual concern want more than anything is to experience sexual pleasure, usually in the context of a loving relationship.

Despite the variety of sexual issues which trouble individuals—a woman’s inability to orgasm, a man’s difficulty sustaining an erection, a couple’s very different sexual appetites, or sexual fear or shame associated with incidents of sexual abuse in childhood—they all have one thing in common: an inability to surrender to, and to sustain, pleasurable sensation.

A major value of therapy is that clients can safely talk about areas of pain and frustration regarding their sex lives as they may never have before. There is no denying the benefits of focusing on their distress to clear up misinformation, to better understand the roots of their sexual content, and to move toward resolving past traumas and present fears.

When interpersonal conflict and other relationship issues dampen desire, better communication skills enable a couple to work through feelings of resentment that have created emotional barriers to their enjoying a physical connection. Homework in the form of structured touch exercises with an intimate partner is an important adjunct to any program to enhance sexual skills.

These cognitive and behavioral interventions have, over the years, proved effective in sex therapy—to a point.

My 30 years working with sexual issues, have, however, shown me that it is effective to add a somatic-experiential dimension to such therapy. People with sexual concerns need to learn to reconnect with their bodies. Simply understanding why they resist sexual pleasure does not automati-

cally release their bodies to feel desire, sustain erections, have orgasms, or feel emotionally connected to their partners.

A more comprehensive sex therapy not only helps our clients to explore their sexual problems and pains but also assists them to make a more thorough investigation of their sexual pleasures.

To do so, clients first need to see how, unwittingly, they may be habitually holding on to pain or tension in their bodies. This kind of direct observation helps them learn how to recognize and release emotional and physical holding patterns that put an automatic ceiling on their ability to tolerate pleasurable excitation.

PUTTING THE BODY BACK INTO SEX¹⁵

Whether I am working with an individual or a couple, I find it helpful at some point in the discussion, especially when painful feelings come up, to shift from a cognitive exploration to a body-based, present-centered way of observing inner experience. By taking a few deep breaths, clients can scan their bodies from the inside and look for sensations of tension and emotion.

While many people equate a somatic approach in therapy to touch, I find that breath awareness can encourage both body awareness and energy release without the therapist's hands-on manipulation. For many who seek therapy for sexual concerns, a therapist's touch is viewed as an intrusion and an invasion, particularly for those individuals who have been sexually molested as children.

When couples are dealing with sexual issues of an inhibitory nature—low sexual desire, erection difficulties, or inability to orgasm—feeling sexually aroused, or confronting the possibility of sexual contact can bring up feelings of fear, shame, and guilt. Memories of bad experiences and negative inner narratives further interfere and stress the body.

That means that whenever the person encounters a potential sexual situation or begins to feel turned-on, he or she is likely to unconsciously hold the breath and tense up. Under those circumstances, the sensation of increased excitement will trigger fear and tension rather than pleasure and letting go—what is called “pleasure-anxiety.”¹⁶

By developing a phenomenological awareness of what occurs inside the body during the therapy session, clients learn to identify sensations of emotion and chronic muscle tension as well as the memories, mental images, and internal narratives that accompany those sensations. As they develop observational skills in therapy, they learn to transfer their inner experiences to sexual situations.

During sexual encounters, clients can catch themselves holding their breath or tensing their abdominal or pelvic muscles and then practice releasing these longstanding contractions. They can also learn to contain their pleasurable excita-

tion rather than aim for immediate discharge, thereby building to a heightened level of physical and emotional excitement.

In dealing with arousal issues with my clients, I like to point out the intricate connection between the breath and passionate sex. For example, heavy breathing is the most arousing sound track for a sexually explicit movie. Clients can augment sexual excitement by focusing on where the breath is held during sex play and breathing into the tight areas. All of the homework assignments I give my clients encourage them to practice deep breathing during any kind of physical contact or sexual activity.

RECLAIMING SEXUAL PLEASURE

Some clients who seek sex therapy simply want to improve their sexual performance, looking to achieve desire, strong erections, or orgasm to please or impress their partner. But unless sexual contact is intrinsically rewarding, with personal enjoyment as a motivation, no amount of practicing the right moves will ever bring genuine gratification to their partners or to themselves.

For example, one of my female clients sought therapy because she had very little sexual interest in her husband. As she spoke to me, I realized that he was manipulative, demanding, and highly critical of her. He sent her to therapy to “get fixed” because she had no desire for him. Obviously, the goal of her therapy was not to help her derive greater pleasure with an emotionally abusive partner. It was to help her learn to trust her feelings and insist on loving and respectful treatment—hopefully by involving her husband in therapy. Having greater sexual pleasure is simply the carrot that motivates change, particularly for him.

If the client's sexual goals appear to be directed by performance standards, therapy will prove most effective by shifting the focus from a successful sexual performance to a pleasurable sexual experience.

Many of my clients, like the American culture at large, are imprinted from early childhood to suspect pleasure. One client had an astounding flash of memory during a session that illuminated the connection between her inability to achieve orgasm and her resistance to a pleasurable sensation. Lois had a good relationship with her husband, and they enjoyed their physical contact. Yet she had never had an orgasm and never had any interest in pleasuring herself.

At one session, at my encouragement, Lois took some deep breaths and scanned her body from the inside. She soon became aware of her tension. With her eyes closed, she felt the restraint in her shallow breath, in her tight jaw and belly, and in the way she held her forearms pinned to her sides.

As Lois held that tension pattern at my request, she suddenly recalled when she was five years old. She and her family were on a country outing picking blackberries. As

she bit into each plump berry, she swooned with delight at the burst of the juicy sweetness in her mouth. At one point, her mother, tired of her little girl's exuberance, snapped, "Oh stop gushing." Everybody laughed. Lois was mortified. She said she believed that from that point on she learned to limit her expressions of joy and that she even became wary of feeling too joyful.

Fred, another client, was a retired businessman in his late sixties. He had lost his first wife to cancer six years earlier, after 25 years of marriage. He was now remarried for almost two years. Even though his new wife was 15 years his junior and very attractive, he was having trouble sustaining an erection with her. He had used Viagra on several occasions with mixed results. After a thorough medical examination showed that he was totally healthy, his physician recommended psychotherapy and referred him to me.

In an early session, after some minutes of deep breathing and at my suggestion, Fred pictured his first wife in his mind's eye. He immediately welled up with tears and was too choked up to talk. He then revealed that he had lost sexual interest in his wife for the last seven years of her life and had had a series of brief affairs with other women. He said he felt terribly guilty that he had treated such a wonderful woman so shabbily. When I asked where he now felt tension or tightness, he pointed to his diaphragm and said he felt a knot in his gut and that his chest was heavy. He became aware of the physical components of his guilt and grief.

It turned out that Fred and his second wife were still living in the same house he had shared with his first wife and even slept in their same bed—the very bed in which his first wife had died. I gave Fred a homework assignment. I asked him to be physically affectionate with his wife, anywhere but in bed, and to do anything sexual they felt like doing, except intercourse. I suggested that he use the breaths we had practiced, paying particular attention to *when* he held his breath and *where* he held the breath in his body.

During our next session, Fred reported that he and his wife did the experiment and were both able to pay attention to the breath. He found that he did, indeed, have a tendency to hold his breath and tense his abdomen. He said that they had had a lovely sexual encounter in which they laughed a lot and that he was able to sustain an erection for a longer period than he had in the recent past. Fred has continued to show progress as he practices releasing tension in his gut and belly, addresses the issues that led to his infidelity with his late wife, and works on his feelings of guilt that seem to infuse all of his relationships.

I recently began working with a couple who came to me hoping to consummate their marriage of 18 months. Even though Maria and Ted had enjoyed a variety of sexual activities culminating in orgasm for both of them, Maria, at 28, was still a virgin and was terrified of penetration.

In their first session, Maria said that she had no memories of being sexually molested as a child. She reported that she felt very loved and supported by her husband who made it clear that he looked forward to having intercourse with Maria but that he was prepared to wait as long as it took for her to be ready.

During their second session, I asked Maria and Ted to take some deep breaths and to scan their bodies from the inside. Maria realized she was holding her legs tightly together. As we began to focus on her tension patterns, Maria remembered something that surprised them both. She recalled a time when she was nine years old and had been constipated for days. Her mother, determined to help, pushed her down on the floor of the bathroom and jabbed an enema into her rectum as Maria screamed in pain. Her father yelled encouragement to the mother from another room and Maria remembered feeling betrayed by both of them.

Maria had completely forgotten about this and felt relieved to discover a legitimate reason for her fears. She did, however, say that her folks were ideal parents and that she not want to blame them for her troubles. She never discussed her feelings with them about that disturbing event.

I gave the couple several breathing exercises to practice together and specifically told them to give up any attempts at penetration for the time being. In the meantime, Maria has begun to recognize how much she has learned to hold herself back to please her parents and how little she has spoken up about her true feelings. We shall soon see how Maria's recognition of stifling her authentic self will affect how she will speak up with her new husband.

All these people have learned to become more attuned to their bodies by delving into their sexual fears and inhibitions and allowing themselves greater sexual pleasure. As our work has progressed, many have also come to recognize the variety of other ways they have resisted good feelings. As our clients accept their right to pleasure, not only does it enrich their sex lives and deepen their bond with their partner, it also enhances their sense of personal well-being.

SEXUAL PLEASURE ACROSS A LIFETIME

Humans are capable of enjoying sexual pleasure from early childhood through adolescence, young adulthood, middle and old age. When sex fails to bring gratification, at any age, a valuable source of vitality is forfeited.

Children are sexual beings. The fact that our society pathologizes, even criminalizes, juvenile sex play without really understanding it is among the most destructive influences in sexual development and is responsible for a wide range of adult sexual difficulties.¹⁷

Most of my clients, even those born in the so-called sexually liberated seventies, report that no adult ever gave

them useful information about sex. Many of them trace their present distress to sexual shame sustained during their earliest experiences as a result of their sexual naivete.

On the other end of the age spectrum, sexual pleasure can be a quality of life issue for older singles and couples. Some elderly people, depressed and craving physical connection, may be ashamed to talk about their sexual needs and desires. Yet more individuals and couples in their seventies and eighties, emboldened by daytime talk shows and magazines, are acknowledging their sexual interest and are seeking therapy and other learning opportunities to enhance their physical intimacy.

Libido is a strong life force and sexual health is an important factor in mental and physical fitness, gratifying intimacy, and personal happiness. Just as any aspect of life can evolve with awareness and practice, clients in therapy can discover that the ability to maximize sexual pleasure can also continue to evolve over their lifetime and contribute to an overall sense of meaningfulness and contentment in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Science is just beginning to investigate the value and role of pleasure in enjoying a healthy sexuality. As therapists, we can provide more comprehensive sex therapy by not just working with our clients to explore their sexual problems and pains but also helping them thoroughly investigate their sexual pleasures.

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TEACHING TEENS ABOUT SEXUAL PLEASURE

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Teaching teens about sexual pleasure remains a controversial issue. Yet there is a critical need to make a case for the relationship between sexual pleasure and sexual health, to suggest how educators can address the subject in the classroom, and to exhort them to overcome their reticence and give this subject the attention it deserves.

We sexuality educators need to broaden our perspectives to include sexual pleasure as part of the larger issue of body awareness. With this change, we can more easily recognize how our culture's neglect of sexual pleasure is but one part, albeit a very important part, of our general alienation from the body that gets to the very heart of the question: "What does it mean to be fully human?"

CULTURAL DISEMBODIMENT

In a way that we too often take for granted, our "sensuality" defines our place in the cosmos as biological beings. As author Diane Ackerman states in her eloquent book, *A Natural History of the Senses*: "To begin to understand the gorgeous fever that is consciousness, we must try to understand the senses—how they evolved, how they can be extended, what their limits are, to which ones we have attached taboos, and what they can teach us about the ravishing world we are privileged to inhabit."¹

For two million years of human evolution, children have learned by directly interacting with their natural environment. At every step along the way, their family of caring adults has taught them the customs and survival skills of their tribe.² During that time, many societies were "embodied" in the natural world, with all of its joys and terrors. People may debate whether life was either "nasty, brutish, and short,"³ or leisurely and idyllic.⁴ But there is no debate that humans lived and evolved in a sensual world. Their very survival depended on their connection to their senses. The experience of bodily pleasure and pain was a vibrant part of life because that was how they learned.

They also bonded to their loved ones through their senses, especially the sense of touch. From infancy onward, humans established and expressed their deepest connections through hugging, holding, touching, and caressing. Countless studies have demonstrated that this physical contact is essential for parent-child bonding. From Harry Harlow's famous monkey experiments⁵ to current brain

research, we have learned that touch deprivation leads to attachment problems.⁶

In what deserves to be a landmark book, *A General Theory of Love*, writers Lewis, Amini, and Lannon review recent research on the physiology of the limbic system, the part of the brain that developed as mammals evolved from reptiles. These studies reveal the biological basis of parent-child bonding and the critical role that parental proximity and touching play in establishing patterns of emotional learning.⁷ Through "limbic resonance, regulation, and revision," our brains establish our capacity for attachment and intimacy.⁸ Because we are mammals, love is, at its biological core, a physical act. It is sensual.

Unfortunately, today's technological society can wreak havoc with a child's need for attachment. Far-reaching ramifications include the inability to form healthy, intimate relationships; the start of physical and emotional problems; and the search for substitute meanings through addictive behavior.⁹

In our society, children are placed in day care programs where they are cut off from their loved ones and the natural world of their senses for many hours of the day. They attend schools where they often sit in enclosed areas without windows and with artificial light. They are rewarded for quietly sitting in their seats, even though their brains are biologically programmed to learn through direct interaction with nature.

Even worse, they often sit passively at home watching television for an average of four hours each day,¹⁰ separated yet again from the direct experience of the world around them. Here their brains receive stimuli, in a way unprecedented in human history, from a powerful source whose purpose is not the child's well-being, but its own. In rapid bursts that shorten their attention span,¹¹ they absorb the corporate mantra of instant gratification and consumerism, learning that satisfaction lies outside themselves and that pleasure comes from buying things.

Against this cultural backdrop is a political climate that sees sexuality as a problem to control and exploit and that views sexual pleasure with trepidation. As sexuality educators, how should we respond? How do we make the case for sexual health? How do we address controversial issues? How do we make the connection between body alienation and deeper spiritual issues? How do we use those insights to integrate the vital issue of sexual pleasure into the framework of sexuality education?

BODY AWARENESS

Much of the controversy over the topic of sexual pleasure is due to our culture's narrow focus on sexuality as genital sex. In workshops that I have conducted, participants have quickly turned discussions on teaching teens about sexual pleasure to discussions on sexual behavior and such "hot button" issues as sexual intercourse.

Sexual behavior and intercourse are worthy topics, but sexuality educators really need to start discussions from the more holistic viewpoint that sexuality is more than sex and that sex is more than intercourse. As author Beverly Whipple said in her article "Helping Girls Claim Their Sexuality": "Sexuality is the totality of a person—physical, spiritual, social, emotional, cultural. We have the capability of expressing our sexuality in a variety of ways, not just with our genitals."¹²

Early education about sexual pleasure should involve teaching our children to enjoy and be comfortable with their bodies. This begins at birth and continues through early childhood largely by the way we hold and touch them and by how we nurture their growing body awareness. Are we physically present to meet their biological need for bonding? Do we provide warm hugs or are we cold and distant? Do we touch our male children as much as our female children? Do we provide them with a stimulating environment that enhances all of their senses? Do we help them to feel "at home" in their developing bodies? Do we ensure that children get the physical activity and fresh air that they need? Do we create a "sensual" world for our children?

Elementary education about body awareness can include a variety of traditional and nontraditional programs. The possibilities include physical education, recreation and dance, yoga, breathing exercises, guided imagery, meditation, and more. In all of them, we must recognize the importance of teaching children about the senses and allowing them sufficient time to explore the natural world around them. We must also help them to understand body diversity—that healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Most important, we must ensure that they have sufficient time to bond with those they love.

During adolescence, teens often feel less connected to their bodies and senses because of rapid physical changes. In addition, they become more focused on sexuality. At this time, we much teach them about the many ways they can achieve bodily pleasure, including both sexual and nonsexual alternatives to genital sex.

FEARS OF EDUCATORS

Why don't educators discuss sexual pleasure? In conducting workshops on this topic, I have found that the primary reason is fear. This fear includes three components reflected by these remarks:

- "I'm afraid of saying something that will be harmful to the child."
- "I'm afraid of saying something that will jeopardize the program."
- "I'm afraid of saying something that will get me in trouble or even cost me my job."

These fears result in a form of censorship because many educators simply avoid the topic due to a lack of clear direction or support. This is by far the most subtle and pervasive form of censorship in sexuality education programs. It is not imposed by an outside authority but occurs inside the minds of the educators themselves. Teens are prevented from learning from each other because classroom discussion is stifled.

Our society's sexism reflects what is censored. Information about female sexual pleasure is withheld more often than male sexual pleasure. My personal experience as a sexuality educator has found that teen girls routinely complete sexuality education courses without learning about the clitoris. Even fewer know that vaginal lubrication is a sign of sexual arousal.

Few people will argue that 12-year-old boys shouldn't know about their penises. Yet the same people consider 12-year-old girls too young to know about their clitorises. Similarly, boys are expected to talk freely and joke about their erections while girls are not supposed to mention vaginal lubrication. Finally, people seldom have a problem with male orgasms during adolescence, as there is a general recognition that most boys will have orgasms as a result of wet dreams, masturbation, or sexual activities with a partner. Yet people reveal an ambivalence and uncertainty about the appropriateness of teen girls having orgasms.

Educators are unclear about where to "draw the line" on what to tell teens about sexual pleasure. Even when they believe that information is appropriate, they fear that students will do something they wouldn't otherwise do or that educators would be seen as condoning destructive or immoral behavior if they said too much.

Beneath these fears is the belief that sexual pleasure can get out of control and that feelings are dangerous because they may lead to risky behavior. Of course, uncontrolled sexual passion, when acted out, can at its worst have life-threatening results. But we must learn to make a critical distinction between feelings and behavior. Sexual thoughts and feelings are not harmful. Sexual behavior is what we must worry about.

The question, therefore, is this: "Under what circumstances is self control more likely to be present—when sexual desire is acknowledged or when it is repressed?"

TEEN SEXUAL DESIRE

Although we have little data to guide us, educators believe that a fairly large number of sexually active teens are having

intercourse for reasons that have very little to do with pleasure, desire, or intimacy.

Author Sharon Thompson's research in *Going All the Way* revealed that many girls had intercourse to obtain a commitment and love from their partner. What they usually got instead was heartbreak or pregnancy.¹³ Thompson also found that many girls had sexual intercourse with little forethought. "They had never been introduced to the notion of desire—their own or their partner's—and so could not anticipate it. When they found themselves in situations where those elements were introduced, they froze; it was like they were in a trance. Certainly, they weren't making an active decision to have sex."¹⁴

As educators, we need to explore questions like: "What does it take to make a good sexual decision?" Some answers are accepted across the spectrum, such as factual information, a value system, good communication, high self-esteem, and future plans.

We do not, however, agree on the crucial issue of sexual pleasure. So we need to explore these questions: "Should we teach teens to acknowledge and even enjoy their sexual feelings or to suppress, ignore, and deny them?" "Which approach leads to good sexual decisions?" "Which approach is sexually healthy?"

We must first overcome the idea that sexual feelings are wrong and that we must avoid them. Instead of viewing feelings as an enemy, we should treat feelings as a guide. Feelings, according to James Nelson, are the "wholeness of human response to the realities experienced by the person.... The feeling response to reality involves both cognition and emotion. It is the willingness to respond with as much of the totality of the self as one is able. It is the openness to both spontaneity and discipline. It is the capacity to be deeply aroused by what we are experiencing."¹⁵

In short, being in touch with sexual feelings will enhance an individual's sexual decision-making and lead to greater self-control. "Self-control implies self possession, the attribute of those persons in touch with their feelings and in command of their movements," said Nelson.¹⁶

A key conclusion of Thompson's study was that awareness is linked to responsible sexual behavior. Learning about sexual desire and arousal—the triggers, the bodily signs, the feelings—empowered the girls to make their own decisions rather than being passively swept away. Recognizing their desires fueled their independence. Those girls who accepted their sexuality and freely acknowledged their sexual desires were more sexually responsible. In general, the more a teenage girl "anticipated and understood pleasure, balanced the desire for love with an array of other concerns and relationships or accepted love as ephemeral, the more likely she was to be realistic, even humorous, about romance. With realism and

humor came recognition of the necessity of protection and contraception...."¹⁷

In the words of author Christine Schoefer: "Feeling desire is an essential component of self-knowledge and a prerequisite for establishing boundaries. If a girl doesn't know what her 'yes' means, how could her 'no' come from the heart?"¹⁸ Sexual desire actually provides an opportunity for self-knowledge. Being able to acknowledge and enjoy sexual feelings is a component of sexual health.

There was already a convincing body of evidence a decade ago that supported Thompson's findings by demonstrating the relationship between sexual attitudes and responsible sexual behavior. Researcher William Fisher found that teens with generally sex-positive emotions were more likely to admit to themselves that they were sexually active and take all of the steps necessary to protect themselves, including communication with their partner and the acquisition and consistent use of contraception. Conversely, he found that sex negative emotions "interfere[d] with the performance of each pregnancy and STD/HIV preventive behavior studied."¹⁹

Most educators would agree that humans make their best sexual decisions in full awareness of all of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. However, few programs help young people learn techniques to pay attention to their bodies in general let alone when they are sexually aroused. It is as if there is a vast conspiracy of silence designed to make people think that sexual arousal isn't happening. The result is that large numbers of teens—boys as well as girls—engage in sexual intercourse, receive very little pleasure or intimacy, and expose themselves to considerable danger.

A NEW PARADIGM

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. We need look no further than our European allies to see that sexual pleasure is considered a healthy part of an intimate relationship.²⁰

While America's mixed messages have produced what writer Lara Riscoll has called "sexual schizophrenia,"²¹ Europeans have seamlessly integrated sexual pleasure into their sexual health messages. "In general, their campaigns encourage specific sexually healthy behaviors and do not express fear or shame. They show people in pleasurable relationships. The messages are generally engaging and appealing. They present images and concepts that relate to sexuality in a sensual, amusing, or attractive way."²²

There is a fundamental difference between the United States and Europe in how teen sexual behavior is defined. Europeans see it as a developmental and public health issue. They consider sexual exploration a healthy part of growing up. "Teen sexual behavior in the United States is viewed in many contexts: a moral failing, a political issue, a private family matter, a public health concern, but seldom as a

developmental matter,” said Linda Berne and Barbara Huberman in the Advocates for Youth publication *European Approaches to Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Responsibility*.²³

This lack of clarity permeates American sexuality education on every level. The raising of simple questions during teacher training often leads to long and unresolved debates. A few examples:

- How do you define *abstinence*?
- What does it mean to be *sexually active*?
- Does *oral sex* count as *sex*?
- Is there such a thing as *safe sex*?

Unless educators have already explored their own feelings and values about teens and sexual pleasure before they are confronted with difficult questions from teens, they will likely avoid the issue of pleasure entirely and revert to answers that only deal with the risks and dangers of the particular activities in question. (See “Questions to Help Sexuality Educators Explore Their Values,” below.)

When we place the topic of sexual pleasure within the paradigm of healthy sexual development, the above questions become easier to answer. Teens have a right to sexual information. Sexual activity is a healthy part of adolescent development. It is healthy for teens to feel good about their bodies and to derive pleasure from them. It is normal for teens to want to engage in intimate relationships.

LOVE AND PLEASURE

Love is the most important topic in sexuality education, yet it is one of the most neglected. Our neglect is a reflection of

our cultural values and our uncertainty about what to say. Our silence on the subject of love creates a vacuum that is filled by popular culture.

Many teens learn about sex and love primarily from television and movies. What they learn is that after people are attracted to each other, they fall in love and are swept away in the heat of passion where words and protection are unnecessary. They learn that sex is somehow more romantic or less wrong if it “just happens.” They learn that genital intercourse is the natural and inevitable outcome of sexual passion and that it happens at the next available opportunity after falling in love. Most disturbingly, by portraying spontaneous, unplanned genital intercourse as the ultimate pleasure, these programs model a behavior that puts teens at increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases or unplanned pregnancies.

It is a mistake to leave love’s definition to the marketplace and the media, where every serious issue is turned into a commodity. Popular culture equates sex with love. It also leaves young people with the impression that romantic love is the ultimate form of love. This superficial treatment reduces our potential to develop healthy, mature, intimate relationships.

Educators cannot do a thorough job with the subject of adolescent love unless we are willing to address the powerful physical feelings that are a natural part of the process. Of course, love is much more than physical feelings, and we need to do everything we can to ensure that teens understand the many types of love, especially the difference between love and sexual attraction. But we cannot make these important distinctions unless we accept sexual pleasure as a legitimate topic of discussion.

QUESTIONS TO HELP SEXUALITY EDUCATORS EXPLORE THEIR VALUES

Fay uses these questions during teacher training sessions to help educators explore their values on these issues:

- In the context of a teen relationship, is sexual pleasure good or bad?
- Is it healthy for teens to have safe sexual experiences?
- Is it healthy for teenage girls to have orgasms?
- Should educators teach teens how to make safer sex more enjoyable?
- Should educators teach teens how to receive as much pleasure as possible during a sexual act?
- Should teens receive explicit instructions on how to pleasure their partner?
- Should teens learn masturbation techniques?
- Should educators teach lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender teens about issues related to their own sexual pleasure?
- Is it okay for teens to have intercourse as long as they protect themselves?
- Should educators adopt the European maxim “safe sex or no sex”?

SAFETY AND PLEASURE

If teens learn not only about alternatives to sexual intercourse but also about being mindful, focused, and aware during all forms of sexual activity, they will find their sexual relations safer and more enjoyable. They will have no need to rush to intercourse. We need to teach them that the skin is the largest sexual organ and that the brain is the most important.

There are many effective teaching strategies that can teach teens about alternatives to intercourse.²⁴ The “Sexual Behavior Continuum,” where sexual activities follow one another sequentially from touching to intercourse with increasing levels of physical intimacy, is another effective strategy. My own version of this activity includes asking teens to name specific sexual behaviors, using their own terminology, and having them reach consensus on where those behaviors belong on the continuum. They then physically place themselves along the continuum based on how far they think it is healthy for a hypothetical 16 year old to go. Discussion follows on why they made their selection and on the importance of always knowing one’s limits and communicating those limits to a partner. (I will mail a free copy of my own version of this activity to anyone who requests it.)

In Deborah Roffman’s book, *Sex and Sensibility*, she asks partners to consider four questions as they move along the continuum:

- *Integrity*: “Do I think that this kind of intimacy with this person at this time is morally right or wrong?”
- *Safety*: “What are the physical risks and are we adequately protected?”
- *Maturity*: “Am I emotionally, intellectually, and socially ready for this experience?”
- *Mutuality*: “What are the needs, desires, and expectations of the other person involved, and how do they relate to mine?”²⁵

Beyond specific strategies such as the ones mentioned here, teaching about sexual pleasure works best when the educator has a mind-set that is open to the discussion of relevant subjects. Do we integrate information about sexual pleasure into puberty education when we talk about body parts and their functions, erections, ejaculations, orgasms, wet dreams, and vaginal lubrication? Do we discuss the sexual response cycle? Do we include information about sexual feelings when we respond to teens’ questions?

BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT

Adolescence is a time when we begin our lifelong search for meaning. Recent advances in brain research have discovered that the prefrontal cortex, the most evolutionarily advanced area of the brain, is still in the process of developing from approximately the age of 16 through 20. This is the main area of the brain that governs impulse control, decision-

making, and consideration of consequences.²⁶

Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of numerous books on the nature of human consciousness, argues in *Evolution’s End* that the adolescent brain is genetically programmed to make the leap to a higher level of consciousness that integrates the three levels of the brain, placing the higher centers in charge and ultimately allowing humanity to reach its full intellectual and spiritual potential.²⁷

Unfortunately, the American culture subverts this process, keeping most people on a level of self-centeredness where they fail to perceive the connections that unite us all. As a result, we fall victim to what the philosopher Alan Watts called modern man’s greatest and most destructive illusion—that we are separate, unconnected individuals.²⁸

Pearce says that the adolescent, although unable to articulate the loss of something he never knew, still feels a nebulous but palpable yearning, what novelists have referred to as the “grape bursting in the throat,”²⁹ or simply “joy.”³⁰ When more fully realized, this “joy” far surpasses our common understanding of pleasure or happiness. It is a state of transcendence that replaces our ego-centered awareness with a consciousness of the unity of all creation.

If the teen never learns a way to explore the source of this deep meaning, he begins the search for alternate satisfactions and substitute meanings, which all become part of the addictive process, keeping him separate, unconnected, and unfulfilled. Our disembodied culture is replete with addictive diversions and banal amusements to keep us out of touch with our real feelings. Addictions, in fact, become a way of avoiding the pain. Even sex can be used in this way.

The paradox of being human is that we are both animal and spiritual. Two decades of brain research have demonstrated the relationship of feelings to the health of the body.³¹ More recent research clearly indicates that our human needs for love and intimacy are essential to our well-being.³² To be fully human is to integrate the body, mind, and spirit—and to be aware.

CONCLUSION

We sexuality educators have a role to play in developing a vision of sexual health that empowers all people to reach their full human potential. In the words of writer Scott Peck: “Let us prepare ourselves. Let us do so by relearning how important we are, how beautiful we are and how we are desired beyond our wildest imaginings. And let us, as best we can, go out into the world to teach others how important they are, how beautiful they are and how they too are desired beyond their wildest imaginings.”³³

We have long misunderstood, exploited, and reduced the concept of pleasure to mere hedonism. When we treat it as a sacred gift rather than as a frivolous pursuit, we will begin to recognize its central place in humanity’s potential.

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SEXUAL STEREOTYPES

STOP FEMALES FROM FEELING PLEASURE

I think my female friends might resent my having a penis. Society seems to give me a lot more leeway because of it. Guys get to enjoy having sex. But for girls, the message is a little different.

Take orgasms. “Women fake orgasms all the time on TV. It’s like a big joke,” says Sophia Salman, 17. “I was watching *Sex in the 90’s* on MTV, and one of the clips was of the show *Seinfeld*. Elaine was faking, because the guy was taking too long and she had to buy shoes.” It’s like the media are telling women they’re not going to get any real pleasure out of sex, so it’s better to just pretend and laugh about it later.

When it comes to masturbation, the message is even more negative. “Women don’t talk about masturbation as much as men do,” says Valerie Termine, 17, from New Jersey. “With men, it’s common conversation. But I’ve never talked about it with my female friends. I was afraid if I told a girl, she’d say ‘Oh my God! What a slut!’”

Same goes for oral sex. For guys, it’s OK. For girls, it’s not. “In the media, it’s always a woman giving a guy oral sex,” says Kara Mason, 17, from Minneapolis. “No one talks about guys going down on a girl. It’s much more acceptable for a guy to ask for it.”

NEGATIVE MESSAGES

Negative messages start circulating when kids are real young, says Beverly Whipple, a Rutgers University professor and expert on sexual pleasure. “Boys are allowed to touch their genitals when they’re urinating,” explains Whipple. “This helps them feel comfortable about touching their bodies. Girls are given the message from a very young age, ‘Don’t touch down there. It’s dirty.’”

There’s a lot more at stake here than orgasms. If girls feel they aren’t entitled to enjoy sex, then they are less likely to say “no” to sex, or to use contraception if they say, “yes,” experts say. That’s because they see sex as someone else’s decision.

“Girls need to be given the message that they can be in control,” Whipple explains. “It’s really important for them to be empowered to say when something does or doesn’t feel good.” They also need to hear positive messages, like, “You’re worthwhile. You have a lot to offer. You have a right to pleasure,” says Whipple.

OTHER WAYS TO EXPERIENCE PLEASURE

Another problem is that people, especially teens, are so focused on sexual intercourse (where “the goal” is for the guy to have an orgasm) they forget there are other ways to experience pleasure. “Sexuality doesn’t have to be goal-oriented, with one thing leading to another,” explains Whipple. “It can be pleasure-oriented so that sometimes just touching can be a satisfying experience.”

Some guys say they also feel like they’re groping in the dark when it comes to pleasing their girlfriends. “It’s more difficult to sexually please a female,” says Greg, 17, from Pennsylvania. “Guys are afraid they don’t know how to please their partner and so they’re reluctant to try.”

FINALLY, TALK TO EACH OTHER

Whipple offers a simple solution. Talk. Honest conversations can help you make better decisions about your sexuality, including whether you want to have sex, other types of touching, or nothing at all, she says.

And here’s the real payoff. Communication makes for better relationships. And maybe that’s the best pleasure of all.

(Reprinted with permission of SEXEtc. Written by staff writer Ankur Dalal. Contributions by national correspondents Caitlin O’Fallon, Minneapolis, MN, and Lindsey Armstrong, Media, PA—Editor)

PROMOTING PLEASURE: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Judith Levine

Author and Journalist
Brooklyn, NY

Six years ago, I wrote a proposal for a book that would say *children and teens can have sexual pleasure and be safe, too*. I thought the idea was a little radical. But I was sure the educated, liberal people in publishing would find it reasonable, even refreshing. Was I wrong.

Publishing house after publishing house declined. “Levine is an engaging writer, and her argument is strong and provocative,” said one typical rejection. “But we don’t see how this point of view will find the broad readership that would justify our commitment.” They all closed with some version of the comradely editorial valediction, “Good luck.” I now hear that phrase as a snort of sarcasm.

When a serious commercial house finally accepted the book, and I wrote a first draft, my editor’s comments were encouraging but sober. “It’s a courageous book,” he wrote me, “for which, as these chapters make abundantly and depressingly clear, the timing probably couldn’t be worse.”

As it turned out, the timing could not have been worse for him or for me. He was fired (not because of my book) and left the business, and my manuscript was passed on to another senior editor. When she demurred (“As the mother of a 13-year-old girl,” she told me, “I’m just not able to address some of the issues with enough objectivity to serve as your guide,”) a new recruit at the house took the orphan in.

That woman inaugurated a year-long pulverization by which the book would be rendered “more palatable to parents.” She asked for “comforting messages,” mottled the manuscript with advisories, which begged for deletions: “This sentence will offend parents.” “Many parents will find this hard to swallow.”

She suggested, in deference to parental anxiety, that I remove the word *pleasure* from the introduction.

The book finally found a good home. But I learned what sexuality educators know too well: it is nearly impossible even to talk about sexual pleasure in children’s and teens’ lives. Especially now. In the last 25 years, sexual fear, abetted by a sentimental, sometimes cynical, politics of child protectionism from both right and left has come to dominate the ways we think and act about children’s sexuality, affecting parenting, psychology, and the law. Sexuality education has been transformed to “no-sex” education.

And pleasure, never much more than what educator Michelle Fine calls a “hidden discourse”¹ in the curriculum, has been virtually expurgated from it.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

If not for two decades of relentless conservative activism, sexuality education probably would not be obsessed with abstinence today. But while advocates of comprehensive sexuality education surely have fought hard, they have also given in. Renaming their classes “abstinence-plus” education, a distinction probably lost on most people, is evidence of more than *realpolitik*. It, like the absence of pleasure from the curricula, reflects the discipline’s own historic conservatism.

Sexuality education was never conceived as erotic training. Far from it. “[Sex instruction] should emphasize the perils of illicit coitus, moral and physical, without which...the instruction would be likely to have little deterrent effect,” wrote one of the fathers of “progressive” sex instruction in 1906.² And throughout history, wrote author Patricia Campbell in a survey of sexuality education texts, “whether the tone is pompous or jazzy, the intent is always to teach [young people] the currently approved sexual behavior for their age group.”³

The approved sexual behavior for any child’s age group in almost any era has been no sexual behavior at all.

Today, even progressive educators tend to view the classroom experience as an antidote to the “oversexualizing” commercial media and a coercive peer culture. The teacher’s role, then, is to advocate informed forethought against the merchants of impulsiveness, to pitch the soberer pleasures of childhood, such as sports and friendship, against the pull of genital sex.

It is no surprise that in 1989, when educator Peggy Brick reviewed the definitions of healthy teenage sexuality she had collected from hundreds of professionals over the years, she noticed “a profound gap in adult thinking about adolescent sexuality. Several concepts central to human sexuality [were] missing,” she said, “notably pleasure, sexual satisfaction and gratification, and orgasm. Even adults who discount the usefulness of ‘just say no’ are unlikely to advocate *good* sex for teens.”⁴

In 1994, SIECUS reported that fewer than one in 10 courses mentioned anything about sexual behavior, and only 12 percent of sexuality education curricula “suppl[ie]d any positive information about sexuality” at all.⁵ Not much has changed in a decade, except that perhaps the situation is worse.

In the public school curricula, desire is still a “hidden discourse.” Take, for instance, the near-universal exercise of brainstorming for the reasons kids have sex (“Uh....to get a

better grade in science?") The list provided by *Will Power/Won't Power*, the Girls' Clubs program for girls 12 to 14 years of age, is typical of abstinence-plus curricula: "to communicate warm, loving feelings in a relationship; to keep from being lonely; to get affection; to show independence by rebelling against parents, teachers, or other authority figures; to hold onto a relationship; to show that they are 'grown up'; to become a parent; to satisfy curiosity." Not on this list, or almost any other: *to have pleasure*.

Desire, when acknowledged, is often as not someone else's or that of the crowd, which seeks conformity more than pleasure. "Peer pressure" is uniformly high on the list of reasons to have sex. If pleasure and desire are hidden, though, they are hiding in plain sight. Any half-awake student knows what to infer from all that talk about chlamydia and early fatherhood and all that practice in "refusal skills" and "delaying tactics": desire, particularly its satisfaction with other people, must be kept at bay.

ABSENCE OF PLEASURE; FOCUS ON INTERCOURSE

If the focus of abstinence-based education is to minimize the risks of pregnancy and disease, it makes sense that the sexual behavior about which students learn the most is the one that carries the most risk: intercourse, which, unless specified otherwise, means penile-vaginal intercourse.

Few educators, even comprehensives, spend much time, if any, discussing the more arcane aspects of lovemaking—say, a hand job. Most people consider a hand job "dirtier" than intercourse, which, risky as it is, has an upstanding family value endorsed by every church on the planet: it makes babies. Hand jobs, by contract, have only one *raison d'être*: they feel good.

The focus on intercourse as *the* verboten act, coupled with the Bowdlerization of non-penetrative sexual experiences, has a paradoxical and ultimately harmful effect. The infinitive *to have sex* is restored by default to the meaning it has long held for American kids (and presidents)⁶: what the penis does inside the vagina. As a Minneapolis sexuality educator put it, paraphrasing his students' definition of abstinence, "We did the things with our hands and our mouths and the trapeze and the pony—but we didn't have sex."

Some years back, when they started to comprehend this confusion, comprehensive sexuality education curriculum writers inserted exercises in which students discuss just what the word *abstinence* means. And what it means in abstinence-plus classes is refraining from penile-vaginal, anal, and (not always clear) oral intercourse. In addition, a few curricula have added lists of non-penetrative pleasures, sometimes called outercourse. Unfortunately, these compendia are almost invariably vague, dull, and short. One suggests only that students "explore a wide range of ways to express love and sexual

feelings" excluding intercourse. Romantic practices, such as sending *billets-doux*, are often specified, but more clearly erotic pursuits, even hands-off practices like talking dirty on the phone or masturbating in front of a partner, are not. The message easily inferred: hand jobs, phone sex, and exhibitionism are just as illicit—even as dangerous—as intercourse.

In representing intercourse as the ultimate, and, by implication, uniquely "normal" sexual experience, educators do more than increase the odds their students will have mediocre sex until they stumble upon some other source of erotic enlightenment. Consciously or not, they also communicate the assumptions that sex is primarily heterosexual and reproductive, and above all, that it is always perilous.

Such uninformed sex, moreover, *is* perilous. The dissemination of information crucial to containing the AIDS epidemic among young people, wrote Cindy Patton in *Fatal Advice*, was "made virtually impossible by the restrictions that prevented the discussion of condoms or instruction in non-intercourse forms of sex."⁷ By 2001, the omissions in abstinence-only education seem to have left a fair number of teens believing that anal intercourse carried no risk. Such "prevention" of sex prevents real prevention—of disease. Young people die.

Equally dangerous, the strict prohibition on intercourse could undermine young lovers' preparedness for penetration. Back when teens were silently sanctioned to do "everything but" infringe the girl's "technical virginity," how many penises happened to ejaculate near or enter some unprotected orifice? How many pregnancies, illegal abortions, STDs, and weeks of panic resulted?

HOW CAN WE BRING BACK PLEASURE?

The irony, of course, is that everyone else—the movies; the musicians; the toy, food, and car companies—are selling pleasure nonstop. But educators about sex, one of the few unpaid pleasures left, are not! Here are a few steps back to talking meaningfully about pleasure in children's and young people's lives.

Call pleasure by its name. Joseph Tobin, editor of *Making a Place for Pleasure in Early Childhood Education*, walks a precarious line between acknowledging the sexual aspects of certain childhood feelings and behaviors and refraining from imposing sexual meanings on things children do that resemble adult sex but may not be experienced that way by the child.

"In one way it's good to say sex play is *sex* play," Tobin explains. "There is something that kids do which is the same as what adults do, which is about the body and desire. On the other hand, you don't want children's sexuality to be understood by projecting adult desires onto it."

What name can we assign to desire, arousal, physical

comfort, or thrill without importing too many grown-up meanings? “A step in the right direction,” answers Tobin, “is to call it pleasure.” This message is as relevant to teenagers as it is to preschoolers.

Teens’ own term for sex is “hooking up.” Rather than inferring too much from what sounds mechanical and quick (just remember some of your own youthful vocabulary), we can try to talk about pleasure with kids in both their language and ours.

Acknowledge the pleasure of risk. Watching the Olympics, I was struck by the moms and dads in the crowds, cheering madly as their children slid down sheer walls of ice on two strips of fiberglass at 80 miles an hour. We value risk. There is little worth doing that does not entail at least some of it.

Sex is one of those things. It is not only physically but also emotionally risky. Risk is part of what makes sexuality exciting. In the age of AIDS, it is crucial to arm students with the personal and practical tools of caution. But sexual growing up, like learning to ski, means falling from time to time.

Fortunately, most mistakes can be repaired. That’s why we must advocate for legal, affordable sexual health services and abortion for young people. And heartbreak, even violence, can be survived. Let’s teach self-protection, but encourage resilience.

Include art and literature to help explain pleasure. Young people need two kinds of information: the “facts” and the truthful “fictions,” the stories and fantasies that carry the meanings of love, romance, and desire.

In school, sexuality education can surely be integrated into the whole curriculum, not just into biology and “health.” If sexuality education is an education in speaking and feeling as well as doing, then it should fall under what is now called language arts. I offer here a short, though hardly complete, reading list.

For their high heart throb quotient, I’d suggest not only the super-canonical poets like Shakespeare and Donne, but Whitman, the joy-brimming democrat of love, Emily Dickinson, who cloistered her longing between the dashes of enigmatic lyrics, and contemporary women poets such as Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, and Sonia Sanchez, who sing the cadences of the body while chronicling the struggle to balance dignity with desire, equality with the compelling surrender of love and sex.

To satisfy the teenage greed for romantic narratives, the publishing industry pumps out thousands of “young adult” novels. But these conform roughly to the same script (as synopsisized by my local bookstore clerk): “Will he ask me to the prom? No, he won’t. I’m going to die. Yes, he will. I’m saved! What should I wear?”

But the classics are also plump with melodrama. Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* are not exactly your

perfect roles models of the egalitarian love relationship, but for longing and passion—phew! Flaubert’s description of *Madame Bovary’s* trysts may be obscure to many teenage readers. But never mind. They can gorge themselves on the anticipation and frustration, jealousy and deceit, the despair and ecstasy for forbidden love (not to mention the clothes), as good as anything on *As the Word Turns*.

And for youngsters who aren’t up to the challenge of this literature, the late 1990s produced a few rare works for young people that explore the nuances of love and sexuality with power, humor, and style. One outstanding author is the hippie surrealist Francesca Lia Block, whose eponymous heroine Weetzie Bat describes with the kind of florid verbosity that many young readers seem to appreciate:

A kiss about apple pie a la mode with vanilla creaminess melting in the pie heat. A kiss about chocolate when you haven’t eaten chocolate in a year. A kiss about palm trees speeding by, trailing pink clouds when you drive down the Strip sizzling with champagne. A kiss about spotlights fanning the sky and the swollen sea spilling like tears all over your legs.⁸

Visual arts open the door equally wide, if not wider, to the feelings and mysteries of sexuality. Pictures can be literally erotic, with bodies in sensual or religious ecstasy or pain. But they don’t need to be figurative to move sense and sensuality.

When Vanalyne Green, a child from a working-class home, saw and made her first paintings, it was a revelation. “Art gave me a language for things I couldn’t feel other ways,” including sexual things, said Green, a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an award-winning video artist, whose work often explores sexuality.

Ann Agee, a ceramic artist in her forties, described with perfect visual recall a dress of her mother’s that hung in a garment bag in the attic. “It was a gorgeous turquoise and green, a watery pattern, silky,” she told me. At the age of four or five, “I used to go up and unzip the bag and look at the dress and touch it and smell it. It was beautiful and special and secret. I didn’t have the language for this yet, but I think that was when I first knew what sex was.”

Embrace pleasure as an all-American value. At the same time as we condemn America’s liberalism, we bemoan its puritanism. Our commercial culture reflects these mixed feelings about sex. Trashing “the media” wholesale is ignorant and prudish, and it costs us credibility with youth.

But the media demonstrate one thing unequivocally: America loves pleasure. Indeed, the founders of our nation considered happiness so important they put it in the Declaration of Independence: *Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. Part of that happiness is sexual happiness.

For better or worse, American culture places a lot of value on sex. But if sexual expertise is expected of adults,

children must get a chance to understand the rudiments. If educators want to be credible about sexual responsibility, they have to be forthright, and explicit, about sexual joy and pleasure.

Editor's note: *The author's book Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex that is discussed in this article was published in May by the University of Minnesota Press and is now in its third printing. It has received significant media and public attention. Its content continues to be the subject of debate as this SIECUS Report goes to press.*

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MASTURBATION: WHAT BETTER WAY TO LEARN ABOUT PLEASURE

Masturbation is a way for all of us to learn about sexual response. It's an opportunity for us to explore our bodies and minds for all those sexual secrets we've been taught to hide, even from ourselves. What better way to learn about pleasure and being sexually creative? We don't have to perform or meet anyone else's standards, to satisfy the needs of a partner, or to fear criticism or rejection for failure. Sexual skills are like any other skills; they're not magically inherited, they have to be learned.

Masturbation is our first natural sexual activity. It's the way we discover our erotic feelings, the way we learn to like our genitals and to build sexual self-esteem. It's the best way to gain sexual self-knowledge and to let go of old sexual fears and inhibitions. For women especially, it's a way to build confidence so we can communicate clearly with our lovers. When we're asked what feels good, we will have the courage to let go of our little white lie, "Oh, everything you do feels good."

Aside from its importance as a form of sexual self-help, the benefits of masturbation are many. Masturbation provides sexual satisfaction for people unable to find partners. It's a way for teenagers with irrepressible sex drives to have orgasms without the possibility of pregnancy. Masturbation also provides a sexual outlet for couples when they are separated, when one partner is ill, when one partner is not interested in sex, or when either partner cannot get enough stimulation to reach orgasm through sexual intercourse.

Masturbation can also be done with a partner (or partners) as a valid alternative to intercourse; sharing masturbation is an important addition to the sexual repertoire of couples. Masturbating prior to partner sex is a way for men to eliminate sexual urgency and rushing. It also provides safe sexual satisfaction during the last stages of pregnancy, and can give relief from menstrual cramps. Masturbating to orgasm is relaxing and helps induce sleep. Finally, and certainly a consideration these days, masturbation is the basic form of safe sex.

—Reprinted with permission from *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* by Betty Dobson (Harmony Books, New York)

PLEASURE, MEDICALIZATION, AND THE TYRANNY OF THE NATURAL

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Don't ever forget that above everything else, sex is a natural function...and whenever we engage in any natural function in a satisfying way, we experience pleasure.¹

Sex is popularly assumed to be all about pleasure, but, surprisingly, there's not much about pleasure in contemporary sexological writing.

There is nothing about pleasure dysfunction in the official medical sexual nomenclature, for example, and there's nothing in university-level or medical sexuality texts about the physiological bases of pleasure, cultural differences in pleasure, or the psychological development of pleasure.

In fact, even though most sexologists surely believe that pleasures are absolutely central to the sexual experience, there is very little empirical or theoretical research that focuses on pleasure at all.

An early '90s U. S. probability sample survey conducted in Chicago asked one question about sexual problems experienced in the past 12 months, and about twice as many women (27 to 17 percent, younger to older) as men (10 to six percent) reported that sex was not pleasurable.² However, unlike the results about arousal and orgasm, these provocative findings on pleasure were not further analyzed.

This gap would not be a problem if pleasure were a simple matter or automatically inherent in sexual activities, but as a clinician, I can support the Chicago survey's belief that neither sensual nor emotional pleasure is simple or automatic.

As with sexual desire, orgasm, spontaneity, cooperation and comfort the clinician's dirty little undemocratic secret is that the experience of pleasure, as with the other aspects of sexual experience, is distributed along a bell-shaped curve.

But the clinician's impressions remain unsupported by any interesting research into the permutations and vicissitudes of pleasure in sex. Why do we know so little?

I would like to address four reasons for the neglect of the study of pleasure in sexology: conceptual complexity, physiological complexity, political complexity, and the medical model myth of the naturalness of sex.

CONCEPTUAL COMPLEXITY

We use the term "pleasure" in many ways, to state the obvious.³ Whereas simple sensory pleasures for infants (warm milk, light touching, googly sounds) may be universal, once a psychological and cultural history of conditioning and other learning develops, we no longer all agree as to what is even considered a sensual pleasure.

Only some use the term "pleasure" to describe experiences such as slipping into cool water on a hot day (not those who fear drowning) or tasting a spoonful of a perfect flan (not those who find puddings "yucky") or hearing a Mozart concerto (not those who dislike classical music) or dancing the samba (not those, alas, who are kinesthetically challenged).

As psychocultural history kicks in, experiences get hooked to meanings and pleasures and can move far beyond the sensory or sensorimotor. We speak of the pleasure of a good joke, of seeing an enemy defeated, of sharing a sunset, or of conversation, yet these pleasures are intellectual and emotional.

Pleasure seems to be fundamentally evaluative, although we are usually unaware of the split-second processes involved in appraising an experience or situation before we produce our reaction.

All these processes arise, along with the added ambiguities of what is meant by "sexual," when we think of "sexual pleasure." For some, but not all, a genital component is required for an experience to be sexual. Others would say a kiss, a fantasy, a memory, or an embrace provide sexual pleasure even without genital arousal or awareness. And, of course, genital arousal can occur without pleasure. Sexual pleasures, then, are unique, varied, sensory, intellectual, emotional, and intimately involved with meaning. Research would need a qualitative dimension to capture such complexity.

PHYSIOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

Periodic upsurges of interest in the physiology of pleasure are related to discoveries in neuroanatomy or neurochemistry, new methods of central nervous system study, or a renewal of research interest in particular (and usually socially disapproved) pleasures such as drug and alcohol use and abuse.

When I was in graduate school, implanting electrodes into animals' brains and observing them press a lever to receive a pulse of electrical current to their "pleasure centers" put the emphasis on the central role of limbic system brain structures.

Later, the focus on “centers” gave way to tracing neuroanatomical circuits identified as “reward pathways.” In turn the interest in neuroanatomical circuits shifted to neurochemistry and the role of synaptic transmitter substances, with dopamine identified as the crucial element in the reward circuits.

New noninvasive brain research methods are beginning to allow brain research on human beings in a way never before possible. However, the physiology of what happens when and where continues to be complicated, and when answers change every time new methods develop, the hope of definitive answers recedes.

At the same time as the research on the physiology of pleasure was evolving, a much greater quantity of research focused on the physiology of sexuality. Utilizing neuroanatomical and neurochemical methods to study nervous system components, and also analyzing the role of steroid hormones produced by the reproductive glands, this research has focused on behavior rather than subjective experiences like pleasure or desire.

In animal research on many types of rodents, primates, birds, fish, et cetera, much has been discovered about how various physiological components are involved in species-appropriate mating behaviors. But, as to pleasure, animals are silent and researchers make interpretations.

Physiological sex research on people has necessarily used noninvasive methods and different endpoints, and some surprising results have emerged. This makes us skeptical about research that lacks inquiry into subjects’ subjective experiences, and suggests that the connections between physiology and subjectivity will not necessarily be linear.

For example, laboratory research on women has repeatedly demonstrated that, in response to looking at or hearing erotic videos, there is little correlation between (objective) measures of genital arousal and subjective ratings of sexual arousal.⁴

Given the subjective nature of pleasure and its connections to cultural meanings and individual history, it seems plausible that research on the physiological bases or concomitants of sexual pleasure is going to be difficult. There will be no simple answers (for example, “It’s endorphins! It’s hormones! It’s blood flow to the genitalia!”) because pleasures are so varied.

The possibilities for pleasure include, for example, the capacity for eroticizing nongenital parts of the body through conditioning and symbolism. As Jeffrey Weeks points out, “In S/M, . . . the whole body becomes a seat of pleasure, and the cultivation of roles and exotic practices the key to the attainment of pleasure. A degeneralization of sex and of pleasure is taking place in these practices. . . .”⁵

Studying “the” physiology of sexual pleasure is thus bound to fail and should be replaced by smaller projects looking for smaller answers, always taking sexual history and

attitudes into account. Again, a qualitative component seems essential.

POLITICAL COMPLEXITIES

Conceptual and physiological complexities provide challenges, but there would have been more progress in theory and empirical research on sexual pleasure were it not for its perpetually ambiguous moral status.

The pursuit of pleasure, including sexual pleasure, is regarded in Western cultures as (a) dangerous, selfish, amoral, immature, short-sighted, and, at the same time, (b) a legitimate (perhaps *the* legitimate) aim of human endeavor on earth.

For every Greek myth celebrating the fall from grace of a pursuit of sexual pleasure without regard for honor, duty, or other virtues, there is clearly another myth (or even the underside of the first one) acknowledging the pursuit of sexual pleasure as inevitable and universal.

The consequences of sex for pleasure are even shown in the kind of contemporary U. S. urban myths where the protagonist wakes up in a motel the morning after a night with a stranger with an STD or HIV as punishment for his or her hedonism.⁶

D’Emilio and Freedman, in their book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, chronicle this ambivalence about pleasure through American history, with women consistently bearing the larger share of “tension, confusion, and guilt.”⁷ They argue that “the dominant meaning of sexuality has changed during our history from a primary association with reproduction within families to a primary association with emotional intimacy and physical pleasure for individuals.” But they also document in every generation the double standard between women and men who seek sexual pleasure.⁸

In her important edited collection about contemporary feminism and sex, Carole Vance made clear how “the tension between sexual pleasure and sexual danger is a powerful one in women’s lives.” Women and girls attracted to pleasure must constantly resist charges that they are “bad” (“delinquent,” “incorrigible”) because pleasure is “selfish, antisocial, and dangerous.” These charges are made by social purity groups “protecting” the family who support the exercise of social control over women’s desire for pleasure.⁹

Our enduring cultural ambivalence about sexual pleasure is vividly played out in the escalating moral panics about the sexuality of children and youth. Judith Levine’s new book on this subject begins provocatively, “In America today, it is nearly impossible to publish a book that says children and teenagers can have sexual pleasure and be safe, too.”¹⁰

THE MEDICAL MODEL

Finally we come to the obstacle to research and theory on pleasure that concerns me the most—the pervasive influence exerted by the model that views sex through the lens of health

and disease (the “medical model”), and the roots of this model in what can be called “the myth of sexual naturalism.”¹¹

The medical model of sex rests on the idea of sex as a natural impulse (or drive) built into people, as it is into non-human animals, by evolutionary forces responsive to the survival- and reproduction-oriented pressures of natural selection.

The sex impulse takes different forms depending on social custom and the vicissitudes of social repression, but at its root it is a biological universe. This perspective is known as “sexual essentialism” and has had a long history in writings about sex, from Darwinians like Havelock Ellis through Kinsey and Masters and Johnson up to the sociobiologists of the present time.¹²

Building on the idea of a natural sexual impulse, the idea of a natural sexual function surfaces, as in Masters’ and Johnson’s “human sexual response cycle.” Their definition of sexual function was a built-in universal excitement-plateau-orgasm-resolution cycle expressed in the timely and proper operation of sexual (reproductive) organs such as vaginas and penises.

The idea of the cycle became the norm when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980 identified sexual “dysfunction” as “inhibition in the appetitive or psychophysiological changes that characterize the complete sexual response cycle” in its diagnostic manual.¹³ This language has remained in each subsequent edition and revision of the APA’s list of disorders up to the present time.

I have written an extensive critique of the scientific basis of this “human sexual response cycle model” in the references already cited, but suffice it to say here that Masters and Johnson chose research subjects whose orgasmocentric sexual script produced the type of physical cycle they were looking for.

The “human sexual response cycle” was not discovered, in other words, but was scientific window-dressing for Masters’ and Johnson’s political goal to create gender equality in sex by generalizing to women the male tumescence/detumescence process.

The Masters and Johnson model fit into traditional medical model themes summarized here:

- the idea of an objectively knowable, universal body governed by laws and processes that work independently of social life and culture (for example, penises are the same, whether attached to men in Siberia or Sumatra)
- a separation between mind and body (for example, normal sexual performance is defined as the proper arousal and orgasm behavior of the genital organs regardless of what is going on in the mind)
- the idea that sexuality is a quality or property of an individual
- a focus on biology rather than culture as the defining aspect of sexual experience

- objective lines of demarcation between normal and abnormal sexual function, drawn by scientific (read: politically and morally neutral) experts¹⁴

Pleasure per se is nowhere to be found in this model or description of sexual (dys)function, since function was merely about the (im)proper performance of physical structures, as with digestion or respiration.

The only subjective aspect of the experience mentioned was pain. “Meaning” was not relevant at all. Meaning had been too much emphasized in earlier psychiatric (read: psychoanalytic) literature, and the new nomenclature represented an effort to put psychiatric approaches to sexuality on a more scientific (read: physiological) basis.

Ironically, a recent modification of the APA’s nomenclature for women’s sexual dysfunctions, developed in a closed session sponsored by urologists and pharmaceutical companies,¹⁵ introduces the phrase “causing personal distress” into the definitions of the standard sexual disorders (of desire, arousal, and orgasm).

It does not appear, however, that this adds anything about pleasure. Rather, it seems that the reason for the addition of a “personal distress” requirement was to avoid diagnosing a woman as dysfunctional based on her sexual partner’s opinion alone.

On the one hand, this is a step away from the universalization of the previous nomenclature—one can have low desire or rare orgasms and not have a dysfunction.

On the other hand, if the authors were truly interested in women’s personal distress, they would have incorporated many other psychological and interpersonal items. As the purpose of the reworking seemed to be to provide “clearer specification of end points and outcomes ... for clinical trials”¹⁶ of new pharmaceutical agents, it seems that considerations of pleasure would only introduce the kind of complexities discussed earlier.

The medical model is too close for comfort to sex as reproduction. The neglect of pleasure and the emphasis on function are tell-tale signs that a one-size-fits-all notion of sexual life and satisfaction is being promoted.

This model, as with all sexual essentialism, seems fundamentally to misunderstand the psychocultural nature of sexual experience. In a misguided effort to support sexual health treatment, norms for sexual life have been created which are at best constricted and neglectful of political realities, and at worst, destructive to the human spirit.

As the global pharmaceutical industry seizes on sexual “problems” as a fertile new market, we must be ever more wary of the consequences of relying on any medical model of sex.

WOMEN’S SEXUAL PROBLEMS

In 2000, I convened a group of feminist social scientists and clinicians to develop a campaign to resist the medicalization of women’s sexual problems being promoted by the

pharmaceutical industry.¹⁷ (See www.fsd-alert.org) One of our first acts was to release a “manifesto” offering a critique of current trends as well as a new classification system.¹⁸

Our manifesto, *A New View of Women’s Sexual Problems*, redirected thinking about sexual problems away from a medical model toward a model based on human rights and women-centered research.

We explicitly endorsed the idea of pleasure as a sexual right as stated, for example, in the World Association of Sexology’s 1999 *Declaration of Sexual Rights*, and listed “inhibition of sexual pleasure” as one of women’s sexual problems.

Our goal was not to develop a pleasure-centered model of sex but only to challenge the errors of the medical focus that arose without regard to women’s sexual realities. It seems obvious that including pleasure is important to any classification system of sexual problems.

CONCLUSION

The neglect of pleasure as a subject in current sexological writing is the legacy of a puritanical and naturalistic sex-as-function, sex-for-reproduction model that is still popular in medicine.

Although few sex researchers or educators would support such a narrow model, our research and educational approaches are still surprisingly silent on the subject of sexual pleasure. This is partly because pleasure, being subjective, is conceptually complex and difficult to study empirically.

Mostly, however, it is because sex researchers and educators still find sexual pleasure a politically dangerous topic. You can unblinkingly apply for a grant to do research on sexual function—but sexual pleasure? You can offer a comprehensive sexuality education lecture on sexual function—but sexual pleasure?

Sexology may be inattentive to sexual pleasure, but the larger culture is busy 24/7 distributing overblown promises of sexual pleasure through consumerist films, popular music, advertising, and, in the latest twist on advertising—the promotion of sexuopharmaceutical drugs like Viagra.

Exaggerated and oversimplified expectations for sexual life require a prepared public, and valid information about sexual pleasure must be an important ingredient in future sexuality education. Similarly, higher expectations produce greater disappointment, and future therapeutic systems will need a rich understanding of the operations of pleasure.

If sex researchers and educators neglect the study of sexual pleasure, the public will continue to be vulnerable to shame and disappointment as well as gullible to every new Madison Avenue promise-pusher.

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A T H E O L O G Y O F S E X U A L P L E A S U R E

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What is a Baptist minister doing in the field of human sexuality?" is a question I am often asked.

What a sad commentary on the perceived relationship between religion (especially that of Baptists) and sexuality! The most common perception that individuals have of a Baptist minister is that of a Jerry Falwell- or Pat Robertson-type denouncing homosexuality.

The truth is that my ministry led me to sexuality education and sex therapy. My story is based upon my belief that we are born both spiritual and sexual. I firmly believe that one of the tasks of life is integrating into wholeness these two aspects of our being.

MY STORY

While I was serving the First Baptist Church of Gloucester, MA, in 1965, my high school youth group asked if I would develop some sessions on sexuality issues. My feelings were mixed. I felt excited, challenged, scared, and perplexed.

I was excited because they were asking for something I didn't have the courage to ask for when I was their age; challenged because sexuality is an ethical and moral issue appropriate for the church to discuss; scared because I had no idea how the congregation would view such a venture; and perplexed about what I should tell them.

What do they need to know? Where would I get my information? Could I be honest, truthful and open with them? What if there was conflict over my answers to their questions? Could I lose my job?

I turned to two other clergy in the community, and together we decided we would support each other and join together to offer a four-session course. Among our congregations, we had approximately 60 young people. We asked them to bring signed notes from their parents saying they could take our course.

The night the sessions started, several hundred young people showed up—all with signed notes from their parents. We had to go to the sanctuary of the largest of the three congregations. There we were—in a sanctuary, under the cross, talking about sex. I must admit it threw me at first.

The kids were great. I learned more from them during those four weeks than they learned from me. How eager they were to learn. How incredibly incisive their questions were. How sensitive they were to my discomfort.

The sessions were very successful. In fact, within six

weeks, Gloucester's Board of Education asked us if we would adapt the sessions into a course for junior high students. For that course, we recruited all of the local clergy who would participate and offered a concurrent course for parents. Again, we had a large turnout and another success.

Other churches and councils of churches heard about our program and asked me to conduct similar programs for them. Soon I was traveling throughout New England setting up sexuality education programs. It became apparent to me how eager people were to know about their sexuality and how closely our sexuality is bound to our spirituality. Eventually, I became a full-time sexuality educator and sex therapist.

THE BIBLE AND SEXUAL PLEASURE

Contrary to the belief of many Christians, the writers of the Bible were not as concerned about the acts of sexual intercourse as they were about human relationships and the motives and consequences of sexual acts.

It is tragic that so many within the Christian faith have dwelt on a few scriptural references and force-fit them into their own concepts of sexual morality. It is hard to understand that Christian minds that can be so flexible and non-literal regarding some parts of the Bible are so inflexible and literal on others.

For example, most Christians take a flexible view when reading Bible verses about: semen and menstruation (Leviticus, 15:16-30); the treatment of a disobedient son (Deuteronomy, 21:18-21); women in church (First Corinthians, 14:34-35); submission of wives (Ephesians, 5:6); slavery (Ephesians, 6:5); and the proper dress and behavior of women (First Timothy, 2:9-15).

But many assume a rigid inflexibility and a claim of absolute literal interpretation when reading Bible verses on masturbation (Genesis, 38:6-10); same-sex practices (Genesis, 19:1-28; Leviticus, 18:22; Leviticus, 20:13; Romans, 1:26-27; First Corinthians, 6:9-10; First Timothy, 1:9-10); and transsexualism and transvestitism (Deuteronomy, 22:5).

In reality, Jesus himself made love the central core of his message and ministry. Nowhere does he, even in his teaching of self denial, condemn sexual pleasure. His concern is always the wholeness, the spiritual well-being, and the loving relationships of people.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

There are three major scientific contributions which I feel are the foundation for understanding the natural functions of sexual pleasure and its theological significance.

William Masters and Virginia Johnson. As a result of their work, we have discovered that males and females are born sexual and that sexual responses occur from before birth until death. This has important implications for our understanding of our creation as sexual beings with the potential for sexual pleasure as a natural part of our life.¹

The fact that sexual response is pleasurable has theological significance: the Creator intended sexual pleasure for humans. For example, females have an organ—the clitoris—that has no other function than sexual pleasure. It has an analog in the male’s penis. Pleasure is intricately woven into human sexual response.

Must not our theology take into account the fact that we have the capacity to experience sexual pleasure at birth and that sexual pleasure can be experienced until death?

Helen Singer Kaplan. She proposed an important fifth stage to the sexual response cycle in the late 1970s that she called desire. She wrote about this in a very helpful book titled *Disorders of Sexual Desire*.²

It is amazing how many people I see suffering from a lack of sexual desire who blame their dysfunction on their religious upbringing. I feel this is an indictment of Christian theologies that have failed to take into account the theory of sexual pleasure or even a theological affirmation of sexual expression other than for procreative purposes.

David M. Reed. He has made a major contribution to our understanding of the psychological nature of sexual response.¹⁰ In my judgment, his ESP theory (Erotic Stimulus Pathway) is crucial to understanding the importance of sexual pleasure. It includes four phases.

The first phase is called *seduction*. This has two components: seducing yourself into becoming interested in another person and learning how to seduce another person into becoming interested in you. For young people, this stage is pleasurable enough in itself.

The second phase is called *sensations*. Our senses are nature’s aphrodisiacs. They are all we need to achieve and maintain sexual arousal and pleasure. I cannot overstate the importance of touch, vision, hearing, smell, and taste.

The third phase is called *surrender*. For an individual to have a pleasurable orgasm, he or she must learn to let go and relinquish control to the experience.

The fourth and final phase is called *reflection*. It is most important. How a person feels immediately after a sexual experience will serve as feedback for future experiences.³

Even though sexual pleasure is an important part of human relationships and sexual function, we rarely educate our children or help adults within the context of the church to

experience the fullness of God’s intention for sexual pleasure. Where is a theology for this important aspect of life?

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Our culture has developed several barriers that hinder the development of a creative theology for sexual pleasure.

Our culture is sexually traumatized. We are bombarded daily by a type of unnatural sexuality that is highly commercialized and exploitative and that presents women as sex objects. This view is found in the visual, spoken, and written media.

We are led to believe that the only highly sexual person is the person with the perfect body who is also young and not religious. Rather than presenting another, healthier view, the church is seen as anti-sexual, except for procreational sexual intercourse within marriage.

Many people in our society grow up with a model of a celibate marriage because they cannot imagine their parents having a meaningful, highly eroticized sexual relationship.

If children grow up to believe that, at best, they should be suspicious of their sexuality and, at worst, hate their sexuality, they will not have a foundation upon which to build a healthy attitude about sexual pleasure.

Our culture values sexual ignorance. While generally valuing knowledge and education, our culture reverses this premise when it comes to sexual self-knowledge. We believe it is better not to know.

Most parents dread the day their child becomes inquisitive about sexuality-related subjects. The most common scenario is that the child asks some questions about sex; the mother refers the child to the father (if the boy asks), and the father evasively stammers through some incoherent jumble of words. If the daughter asks, the mother gives her a booklet.

If we teach our children anything, it is usually basic information about sexual plumbing and anatomy. We usually tell them nothing about being a good lover. For some reason, we fear they will “get into trouble” if we give them information about sexual response and pleasure. As a result, most childhood and early adolescent acting out is a form of experimentation based on sexual ignorance.

Our culture is sexually secretive. We present sex as the great mystery. The more mysterious, the healthier and more pleasurable it will be when marriage occurs. Sex is seen as so personal and so intimate that it is inappropriate for a person to share thoughts about it with anyone.

We often make judgments about people who have erotic fantasies that do not coincide with “normal” heterosexual, monogamous, and married sexual intercourse. Christians are not supposed to admit to lustful thoughts and sexual passion. They, therefore, keep these thoughts in the recesses of their most secret place.

The church does not value sexual pleasure. As a result, it

has not included it in Christian sexuality education curricula.

Basically, there are two opposing sexual value systems within the Christian church.⁴ Each is as ancient as the other, and both have had prominent spokespersons throughout history.

The first is the one most identified with the church. It is based on a procreational ethic that sees male sperm as the bottom line because the sperm is the “seed of new life.” Women are seen as nurturers and supporters. Consider the scenario about the child who asked his/her parent where he/she came from and the reply was “Well, Daddy planted his seed in Mommy and that seed grew up and became you!” In this unscientific explanation, there is no concept of the female egg carrying life.

This view says that procreation requires intercourse with another person of the opposite sex, within marriage, and in a manner which promotes pregnancy. The focus of this value system is entirely on the “acts” of sex carrying the moral value. For the purist, birth control, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality, premarital sex, alternative sexual lifestyles, and erotic sexual behaviors other than intercourse are prohibited.

The second is based on the nature of relationships, rather than various “acts.” This view holds that the Bible and Christianity are about human relationships. The bottom line is Jesus’ statement on loving God, one’s neighbor, and one’s self. Sexual “acts” and lifestyles are measured against the motives and consequences of the “acts” and how they enhance relationships with self, others, and God.

This view says that there is nothing inherently sinful about the “acts” of sex that are consummated mutually, without coercion, without harm to any of the participants, and out of sight and sound of unwilling observers.

These two sexual value systems are not compatible. If we are to develop a theology for sexual pleasure, it will have to come from a value system that emphasizes the dimensions of a person’s relationship—with self, others, the “its” in life, and the Thou.

A THEOLOGY

It is my thesis that love, spirituality, and sexuality are inextricably bound together. I believe that it is nature’s (and God’s) intention to create people who are sexual in the fullest sense of the word. “And God saw that the Creation was Good.” (Genesis, 1:31).

How then do we develop a theology of sexual pleasure that is relevant for daily living? *The New Britannica-Webster Dictionary and Reference Guide* defines theology as “the study and interpretation of religious faith, practice, and experience, especially thought about God and his relation to the world.”

If we take the last part of this definition—God and

God’s relation to the world—then we must ask, “What was in the mind of God regarding our creation?” There are several ways people can explore this.

For some, it is through the Bible. A powerful description of God in the New Testament is that God is Love (John, 4:8-9). Jesus certainly presented a God of love in his ministry, and he affirmed this when he responded to the Pharisees with “the great commandment” to love God, oneself, and others. John affirmed love as central when he stated that “...God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son.” (John, 3:16) Love seems to be a central reality in the mind of God and is not abstract or static but dynamic and active. This love also defines God’s relationship to the world and how God wants humans to relate to each other.

For others, it is through the findings of scientific research. If all of creation is from God, then the more we learn about creation the more in touch we will be with the mind of God. I am in awe at our creation as sexual beings. Our capacity for love as well as our ability to respond to intimate relationships with such deep and meaningful sexual pleasure is a humbling experience.

For others, it is by seeking wholeness through the integration of mind, body, and spirit. The quest for wholeness and spiritual oneness with God or with each other has been experienced in every period of history and among all people.

When people experience the integration of love, sexuality, and spirituality, I feel that God’s intention is born anew in the world. Sexual pleasure does not hinder either spiritual growth or service to humanity.

CONCLUSION

The current focus on finding sexual meaning in our time is a reaction of humans striving to understand the nature of their sexuality. Many are fearful of implications. Maybe one of those implications is that they will discover that they can find sexual pleasure in all the dimensions of their lives. That will happen when they join their sexual selves with their spiritual selves and seek appropriate ways of expressing that pleasure in all their relationships.

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W E L F A R E R E F O R M ' S P R O V I S I O N F O R
A B S T I N E N C E O N L Y U N T I L M A R R I A G E P R O G R A M S

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Editor's note: *As sexuality educators and professionals, we are all too aware of the federal government's abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Since the largest of these programs, Section 510 of the Welfare Reform Act, was signed into law in 1996, we have watched as unproven abstinence-only-until-marriage programs proliferate in our communities and our schools, and we have eagerly anticipated a chance to debate the merits and potential harm of these programs.*

In recent weeks, advocates for comprehensive sexuality education have had the chance to do just that as the reauthorization process for Section 510 funds began in Congress. As you read this update, you should know that many of the successful outcomes were the direct result of action taken by individual advocates of comprehensive sexuality education who called their representatives and senators. Pay particular attention to these lawmakers involved in the process and use the Web sites listed at the end of this article to learn where your legislators stand on this issue.

You might also want to see if your representative has signed on to the Family Life Education Act (HR 3469), a bill that would provide funding for more comprehensive educational programs that teach about the benefits of abstinence as well as contraception and disease prevention methods. This bill now has over 60 cosponsors.

After five years of watching the federal government's abstinence-only-until-marriage programs change the landscape of sexuality education in our communities, we now have opportunities to take action by letting our policymakers know how we feel about this issue.

In 1996, conservatives in Congress, eager to appease those who felt that much of welfare reform did not go far enough, slipped into law a \$250 million, five-year abstinence-only-until-marriage entitlement program.

As most sexuality educators and professionals now know, these programs cannot teach preventative measures such as condoms and contraception. In fact, these programs must stick to a strict eight-point definition which includes teaching teens that sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful physical and psychological effects.

ACCEPTED WITHOUT DEBATE

Known more popularly as the Section 510 program, this welfare reform provision was inserted at the last minute and never received the debate that new social policy clearly warrants.

Now the provision is set to expire, as is the case with much of 1996's welfare law. As a result, Congress is swiftly moving to reauthorize the gamut of issues in the law, including the Section 510 abstinence-only-until-marriage initiative.

This time however, the entitlement program is not getting an easy pass, and the White House is fighting to maintain the status quo. Advocates of a more comprehensive approach to sexuality education are taking on the Administration, forcing discussion on the merits of the law and its potential harm to America's young people.

SECTION 510 GETS A HEARING

For months, advocates of comprehensive sexuality education have monitored how the U.S. House of Representatives would take up the abstinence-only-until-marriage provisions.

House committees delayed decisions about who maintained jurisdiction over Section 510 reauthorization. It eventually landed in the Subcommittee on Health, which is part of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The subcommittee held its first hearing on HR 4122—a stand-alone bill introduced by U.S. Rep. Fred Upton (R-MI) and cosponsored by U.S. Reps. Ralph Hall (D-TX); Michael Bilirakis (R-FL), the subcommittee chairman; and Billy Tauzin (R-LA), the full committee chairman. The bill proposed a straightforward reauthorization of the Section 510 program for another five years.

From the outset, the scales tipped toward a favorable hearing for reauthorization: witnesses were limited to three individuals, two in favor of reauthorization and one opposed. Chairman Tauzin, who rarely attends subcommittee hearings, arrived early and stayed through the hearing's conclusion.

Testifying in favor of reauthorizing the Section 510 program were Dr. Joe McIlhaney, president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health (MISH) and Jacqueline Jones Del Rosario, an abstinence-only-until-marriage program provider in Miami, FL. The witness who spoke in opposition to the bill was Dr. David Kaplan, chief of adolescent medicine and professor of pediatrics in the Department of

Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Dr. Kaplan is also the chairman of the Committee on Adolescence at the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Dr. McIlhaney is well known among abstinence-only-until-marriage supporters and testified to the “credible evidence showing that abstinence education is having an impact.” He failed, however, to cite any peer-reviewed studies to support his claim. Instead, he spent the bulk of his time attempting to refute credible evidence that comprehensive sexuality education programs work. He said these programs do not address “the problem of out-of-wedlock pregnancy” or the alarming rates of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among young people, which he characterized as “two of the most profound medical problems of our day.”

Ms. Del Rosario spoke about her firsthand experience running a federally-funded abstinence-only-until-marriage program. Her testimony, however, repeatedly equated all Title X family planning with the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education—a myth perpetuated by abstinence-only-until-marriage proponents. Advocates such as Del Rosario seek to compare apples and oranges by equating the level of funding for Title X family planning services with the level of funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage education—this in spite of the fact that Title X provides funds for medical services, not educational services, the former being a considerably more expensive enterprise.

Dr. Kaplan spoke from the perspective of a physician and asked members not to make sexuality education an “either/or issue,” saying that “young people need information about abstinence *and* contraception.” He went on to cite the support for a comprehensive approach to sexuality education embraced by every major medical group both inside and outside of the government.

SECTION 510 GETS A VOTE

The full Energy and Commerce Committee voted 35-17 on April 24 in favor of a bill (HR 4585) to reauthorize the entitlement program created by 1996’s welfare reform law.

Supporters of broader, more comprehensive sexuality education interventions did, however, provide significant debate.

The first amendment, proposed by U.S. Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA), would have allowed states some flexibility in crafting their own education programs. It proposed leaving the strict eight-point definition of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in place while permitting states to design other interventions to best meet their own programmatic needs. It failed by a vote of 22-32.

The second amendment was offered U.S. Rep. Lois Capps (D-CA) and would have added language to the current law requiring funded programs to be medically accurate. It was defeated by a vote of 19-31.

Finally, U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) proposed an

amendment to require programs to be proven effective as a condition of funding. It failed by a vote of 20-32.

All three amendments received broad Democratic support and nearly unified Republican opposition. Only two Democrats—U.S. Reps. Chris John (D-LA) and Bart Stupak (D-MI)—voted with the Republicans

Unfortunately, the voting down of the three amendments denied any changes to the current law. Chairman Tauzin’s attendance at the hearing the day prior to the vote made it clear that Republican unity on reauthorizing the program was not up for debate.

U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson applauded the committee’s action, saying that “reauthorization of the abstinence education grant program is a key component of this administration’s efforts to enhance child well-being, foster the formation of healthy families, and help teens achieve their full potential.”

Supporters of comprehensive sexuality education felt differently. “Our elected officials had an opportunity to take action and base public policy on both sound scientific research and overwhelming public support. Instead, ideology triumphed, placing our nation’s young people at considerable risk,” said SIECUS President Tamara Kreinin.

THE ROAD AHEAD

It’s an election year. Therefore, it’s not surprising that House members, anxious to get home and campaign, intend to vote on the large welfare reform bill prior to Memorial Day.

The Republican leadership, equally anxious to deliver on welfare reform to President Bush, rushed a full floor vote on the Republican welfare reauthorization bill (HR 4737) on May 16.

House Democrats, led by U.S. Rep. Ben Cardin (D-MD), were permitted to offer only a single amendment. In terms of the sexuality education provisions, this alternative bill included the three amendments offered during committee and described previously in this article. Debate was permitted on the sexuality education provisions, and a number of members including U.S. Reps. Barbara Lee (D-CA), Lois Capps (D-CA), and Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) spoke on behalf of a broader federal policy on sexuality education. Rep. Jackson-Lee said, “With respect to the issue of abstinence, no one is opposed to it, but we like to have the truth. Teenagers want to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This bill is limiting, and my colleagues know that this is wrong.”

The final vote in favor of HR 4737 was 229-197 and was along party lines. The Democratic alternative went down in defeat with 222 against and 198 in favor, again, along party lines.

The outlook in the Senate remains blurry. The Senate Finance Committee has jurisdiction over all welfare reform, and there is an immense drive for a bipartisan bill

[or even tri-partisan bill if Independent Jim Jeffords (I-VT) can be persuaded].

Democrats, fearful of too much debate in an election year when they hold control of the chamber by the slimmest of majorities, may be willing to make necessary trades to project an outward appearance of solidarity.

In mid-May, a letter was released by several members of the Finance Committee, including moderates like Senators Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and Jeffords (I-VT), that signaled support for Section 510's reauthorization. Separately, comprehensive sexuality education advocates have worked with several Democratic members of the Finance Committee on a letter shepherded by Senator John Kerry (D-MA) that would put signatories on record in support of state flexibility in the use of Section 510 funds.

Finally, in an entirely separate development, the powerful Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), has decided to weigh in on welfare reauthorization by sending a list of that committee's priorities to the Finance Committee.

It is a near certainty, due to the level of advocacy legislators are receiving in support of changing current Section 510 language, that the HELP letter will address the issue directly.

THE GOOD NEWS

While the Senate moves forward, valuable and positive experiences mark the process to date despite the loss in the House.

First, for the first time in history, there was debate in the U. S. Congress on the merits of abstinence-only-until-marriage education. Many policymakers were given a

primer on an issue that they may not have otherwise faced had this debate not occurred.

Second, the White House and Republicans shored up their defenses because they feared legislators would support comprehensive sexuality education. They were put in the position of going on the defensive—a testament to a battle well fought by the ever-increasing cadre of supporters of comprehensive sexuality education.

Third, champions of comprehensive sexuality education are continuing to surface in both the House and Senate, making a long-term strategy toward change more likely. The vote in the House Energy and Commerce Committee, as well as the statements made by members during that debate, continue to provide a foundation for future proactive advocacy efforts.

Though success to date is measured, advocates of comprehensive sexuality education programs have surpassed their initial expectations in light of the Bush Administration's support for abstinence-only-until-marriage education.

When the current battle subsides, the annual appropriations battle over the two other streams of federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage education—the Adolescent Family Life Program and the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance-Community Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS-CBAE) program—will be front and center.

The level of discussion is the highest ever. Building on this level is key to future successful strategies.

For more information, visit www.thomas.loc.gov or energycommerce.house.gov/

SEXUAL CONSENT AND SEXUAL PLEASURE

Let's talk about sex. At first it might not be easy, but it will make your sex life not only happier, but safer, too—because if you learn how to communicate about sexual pleasure you'll also learn how to communicate consent.

We know how to talk about those things that play an important part in our day-to-day experiences like friendships, careers, beliefs, family, money, health, and relationships. Sexual communication, however, often falls by the wayside because many of us do not have opportunities to talk in a safe, open environment.

For those of us who've been taught to act like "good girls," it can be especially tough to communicate sexual needs—but what about communicating for our sexual safety? If you have a hard time with the idea of communicating during intimacy with the goal of sexual pleasure or satisfaction (hey, it might take some getting used to), consider that your safety (both emotional and physical) is also at stake.

Consent is not about the absence of a "No," but rather, the presence of a "Yes!"—the affirmative exchange of information between two people. If one partner asks the simple question, "How do you feel about this?" and the other partner demonstrates, verbally and physically, "I like it," that sets up a basis for further communication, and, if both partners so desire, further intimacy.

(Adapted with permission of the author from the article "Sexual Consent and Sexual Pleasure: Why Learning to Talk about Sex Can Make You Safer, Happier, and Healthier," by Lauren M. Olsen, freelance writer and projects assistant at Virginians Aligned Against Sexual Assault –Editor)

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Submitting Articles and Book and Audiovisual Reviews for Publication in the *SIECUS Report*

Each issue of the *SIECUS Report* features groundbreaking articles and commentary by leaders and front-line professionals in the field of sexuality and education, along with news, special bibliographies on varied topics, book and audiovisual reviews, recommended resources, and advocacy updates. All of this comes to members and other subscribers six times each year.

Manuscripts are read with the understanding that they are not under consideration elsewhere and have not been published previously. Manuscripts not accepted for publication will not be returned. Upon acceptance, all manuscripts will be edited for grammar, conciseness, organization, and clarity.

To expedite production, submissions should adhere to the following guidelines:

PREPARATION OF MANUSCRIPTS

Feature articles are usually 2,000–4,000 words. Book and audiovisual reviews are typically 200–600 words.

Manuscripts should be submitted on 8½ x 11 inch paper, double-spaced, with paragraphs indented. Authors should also send a computer disk containing their submission.

All disks should be clearly labeled with the title of submission, author's name, type of computer or word processor used, and type of software used.

The following guidelines summarize the information that should appear in all manuscripts. Authors should refer to the current issue of the *SIECUS Report* as a guide to our style for punctuation, capitalization, and reference format.

Articles

The beginning of an article should include the title, subtitle, author's name and professional degrees, and author's title and professional affiliation.

Articles may incorporate sidebars, lists of special resources, and other supplementary information of interest. Charts should be included only if necessary and should be submitted in camera-ready form. References should be numbered consecutively throughout the manuscript and listed at the end.

Book Reviews

The beginning of a book review should include the title of the book, author's or editor's name, place of publication (city and state), publisher's name, copyright date, number of pages, and price for hardcover and paperback editions.

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The beginning of an audiovisual review should include the title of the work, producer's name, year, running time, name and address of distributor, and price.

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All questions and submissions should be addressed to the editor, by telephone, at 212/819-9770, by e-mail to medwards@siecus.org, or by mail to *SIECUS Report*, SIECUS, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350, New York, NY 10036-7802.

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