

Sex Education Is a Parent's Responsibility

Of the many unchristian values to emerge from the recent "sexual revolution," few have been more damaging to the family than the assumption that schools have the total responsibility for teaching sex education. Today, many teachers do more than just inform children about sex. They instill values that often contradict biblical standards. The result is a generation of youth with few restrictions concerning premarital sex.

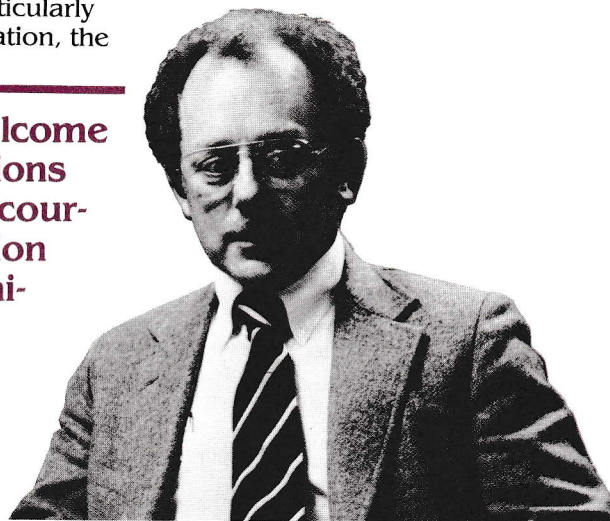
Dr. James Dobson observes that schools would never have assumed predominance in this area if parents had not yielded it to them. In his recent book *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, he expressed his opinion that the primary responsibility for sex education belongs in the home.

"There is a growing trend for all aspects of education to be taken

from the hands of parents (or the role is deliberately forfeited by them). This is unwise. Particularly in the matter of sex education, the

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fathers, Dr. and Mrs. Penner have identified seven stages in a child's life that require varying degrees of parental involvement. Understanding these developmental steps allows parents to begin what Dr. Dobson calls a "gradual enlightenment" in sex education.



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best approach is one that begins in early childhood and extends through the years, according to a policy of openness, frankness and honesty. Only parents can provide this longitudinal training."

Focus on the Family editors recently interviewed Dr. Clifford and Joyce Penner, two therapists who specialize in sexual counseling. They reaffirmed Dr. Dobson's position on this subject.

Dr. Penner is a clinical psychologist who earned his doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary. Mrs. Penner, a co-therapist, received her master's degree in nursing from UCLA. They are the authors of *The Gift of Sex* (Word Books, 1981) and are popular speakers on the subject of sexual fulfillment in marriage. They maintain a counseling practice in Pasadena, California.

While the Penners agree that sex education should begin at home, they have found many parents reluctant to teach their children about this important aspect of life. The dilemma is compounded by the fact that instilling proper sex attitudes means much more than a long talk about the "birds and the bees." As Dr. Dobson noted, teaching children about sex requires years of careful, constant training.

To help struggling mothers and

Infancy

The first stage begins *immediately* after birth. At this point in life the baby learns about human touch and appreciates the warmth of his parents' embrace. A close physical relationship should begin immediately after birth, or the child may never fully learn to appreciate close contact with another person.

Toddlerhood

From the ages 2-4, the child develops an awareness about his genitals. It is natural for the toddler to examine his body, but many parents react negatively to this exploration. Parents should neither be alarmed nor punish their toddler for this behavior. An excited response from mother or father tells the child that his genitals are dirty and untouchable. The youngster begins to perceive his genitals in the same way as a hot stove. "Don't touch! It is dangerous."

Giving the genitals "cutsie" names is also ill-advised. They should be treated like any other part of the body.

Preschool

During a child's fourth year he becomes aware of the physical differences between males and females. This awakening leads to a

natural inquisitiveness, and for the first time he begins to ask questions about sex. The following "Five Rs" are a useful resource for parents when they are confronted by inquiries from their offspring.

Reinforce—The first step mom and dad should take is to welcome their child's questions regarding sex. Discouragement or rejection will close communication between parent and child and may cause the youngster to look elsewhere for answers.

Reflect—Parents must clarify the child's query to ensure that the response is appropriate. Dr. Dobson shared the following story in his book *Dare to Discipline* about one mother who regretted that she did not "reflect" with her nine-year-old son Davie.

"Davie came home from his new school on the first afternoon and asked his mother point-blank: 'Mom, what's sex?' The question smacked her hard; she thought she had two or three years before dealing with that issue and she was totally unprepared to field it now. Her racing mind concluded that Davie's new school must be engaged in a liberal sex education program that had introduced the subject to him, and she had no choice but to fill in the details. She sat down with her wide-eyed son, and for 45 minutes of sheer tension she gave him a dry-mouthed, sweaty-palmed harangue about the birds and the bees and the coconut trees. When she finally finished, Davie held up his enrollment card and said, 'Gee, Mom, how am I going to get all that in this little bitty square?' As Davie's mother discovered, there is a delicate art in knowing when to provide the younger generation with additional information about sex."

Review—This step allows parents to review their child's understanding of the subject and provides an opportunity to correct misinformation. The source of their child's confusion can also be discussed at this time.

Respond—The parents' response should be succinct and factual, and they should not hesitate to acknowledge ignorance. There are many good resources available to help parents who feel inadequate.

Repeat—The most essential part

about communicating is reiteration. Parents should make sure their youngster understands the response before concluding the conversation.

School Age

As a child enters the primary school years he becomes more curious about his body, and this will inevitably lead to more questions. His arousal may also result in "exploratory play." This is natural, and parents should not be alarmed at this development.

By the time a child is ten years old he is ready for more detailed information that schools or churches may be better prepared to offer. Girls need instruction on the subject of menstruation, and



teen should be to establish values about sex before the heat of passion gets their child in trouble. A recent study indicates that 85 percent of all first-time sexual experiences are unplanned.

Parents can minimize risks of teenage sex by reducing the opportunities for it. Mothers and fathers should know who their child is dating, where he is going, and when to expect him home. Idle time with a partner can lead to unplanned sexual activity. Peer pressure also prohibits the teenager from admitting ignorance about sex, so communication becomes more difficult. However, parents should take opportunities to discuss the health hazards of premarital sex such as venereal disease and herpes. Masturbation

The parents' chief concern for their teen should be to establish values about sex before the heat of passion gets them in trouble. Nearly all first-time sexual experiences are unplanned.

both sexes should receive training to prepare them for adolescence. Focus on the Family offers a book and accompanying tapes by Dr. Dobson entitled *Preparing For Adolescence* that can be used as part of this enlightenment.

Junior and Senior High

When a child reaches puberty, his sexual concerns tend to be more about attitudes than information. If parents have neglected to communicate openly with their child during the earlier years, then he will not be receptive to their moral values about sex. Peer pressure plays an important part in the youth's life, and he will be greatly influenced by classmates regarding relationships with the opposite gender. Thus, decision-making is the most important part of the adolescent's interest. The parents' chief concern for their

is also an important topic for teens, and this should not be ignored.

The Penners noted that regardless of the child's age, the key to successful sex education is parental involvement. We trust that the stages briefly outlined above will help parents understand and anticipate the needs of their children to appreciate God's gift of sex.
Rolf Zettersten

An interview Dr. Dobson recently conducted with the Penners will be heard on Focus on the Family radio May 25-27 (see page 14 for details).

When Schools Teach Sex, a good resource for parents who are concerned about sex education, is available from Focus on the Family this month (see page 8 for further information).