

EDUCATING OUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE TRUTH AND MEANING OF HUMAN SEXUALITY by Tim and Patrice Westman

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Sex is *not* love, but is intimately bound up with it, because properly understood, sex is *an expression of love*.
- The love we mean here is the unique and deeply personal gift of self bestowed by husband and wife on each other: wholehearted, sincere, not holding anything back in any aspect of married life—including sexual intimacy. *Spouses must prove their self-giving to each other in sex as much as in everything else.*
- Without a genuine struggle to live this ideal of self-giving—including being open to new life—parents will be severely handicapped in their ability and willingness to present their children with an authentic picture of human sexuality. The grave risk will then be that their kids will view sexuality *apart* from love, for example, simply as a biological impulse, as a means of self-assertion or empty eroticism—or worse. As we well know, this distorted view of sex permeates our culture at almost every level.
- Therefore, the foundation—and most potent form—of sex education is the daily effort of husband and wife to express their love for each other *in tangible ways*. This is far more important than the brief conversations we will have with our kids to explain the “facts of life”, because it truly educates them in *love*.
- Educating our kids in human sexuality is the *primary right* of parents, and must not be usurped by others. However, it also is a *serious duty* that parents cannot abdicate. Finally, it is a *privilege* that brings parents closer to their children—who better than we can show them the beautiful way they were loved into existence?

2. MORE SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES

- *Always tell the truth about sex to your kids*—no storks, etc. However, this truth must always be presented in a manner appropriate to the age of each child; we have to be able to “go down to their level”, but always with the purpose of leading them to the complete truth. And don’t be surprised if one of your kids wants to get to the complete truth faster than the others!
- *Don’t show surprise or discomfort at a pointed question in this area, and give a prompt response.* Our kids must feel confident that they can ask us these questions and receive real answers. Putting them off or suggesting that they shouldn’t be asking can erode this confidence.
- *Stay one step ahead by slightly anticipating your child’s natural curiosity.* They typically wonder about these things earlier than we think, and in the present moral climate, are exposed to sexual topics outside the home much earlier than they should be. Being proactive is preferable to being reactive.
- *“Only information proportionate to each phase of their individual development should be presented to children and young people.”* This point cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Each child is unique, and may be more or less ready to receive this information than his siblings. In short, he *has the right to his own innocence*. While this point may seem to contradict the “anticipation” guideline above, it really does not. It simply demands that parents know and respect the particular stage of development of each child as an individual.
- *Husbands must not leave this task to their wives.* While it is normal for the mother to answer questions that come up on the spot when the children are young and the answers will be more general, it is crucial that fathers speak to their sons, and mothers to their daughters, as the kids reach the age of reason (approximately 6-7 years)

and beyond. *This is a test of the father's confidence in his paternity.*

- In speaking to your children about human sexuality, follow the rule of the “Three C’s”—*clear, concise, and change the subject!* We want to shoot straight with them, but not belabor things in a way that would appear unnatural. Also, we must keep in mind that we are dealing with a subject that is not simply physiological, like sneezing, but with a matter of deep personal intimacy—both for us and for our kids.
- *Once is not enough.* Don’t think you can breathe a sigh of relief after the first conversation you have with your child. Done properly, sex education is a progressive process whereby the full beauty and truth of human love is unfolded over time to the child. Follow-up at regular intervals (at least yearly) is necessary, and it also gives the parent a great opportunity to have a deeper conversation with the daughter or son.
- *Make sure your children understand that they are NOT to repeat to their friends what they hear in these conversations.* We must always respect the right and privilege of other parents to educate their children in this area.

3. DOWN TO THE NITTY-GRITTY: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Note: the age groups referred to below are approximations; parents must use prudence and their own knowledge of their children to best determine what they are ready to hear and when.

- Although sexual union is the ultimate physical expression of love between husband and wife, it’s not the only one. Don’t hesitate to let your kids see their parents embracing, kissing, holding hands, etc. After all, we’re made of matter as well as spirit, and our love has to be shown through what our bodies do. This will help our kids greatly in understanding the deeper expression of love in marital intimacy.
- ***Ages 3-5: Show them what makes girls and boys different.*** The best occasion for this is bath time or diaper-changing time. If the children are approximately the same age, you can give them baths together; if not, you can have the older ones watch or even help. If they don’t mention it themselves, point out to them that girls and boys have different parts by which they wet, and give them names for these organs, either a simple nickname or the correct name.

At this age, we should tell our kids that just as it is dirty to pick their noses, it is wrong to play with this part of the body, and even worse to touch other children there. We should also begin to train them in modesty by making sure that they always go around with their pants or panties on.

- ***Ages 5-6: Explain to them where children come from.*** The best occasion for this is when the mother is pregnant with another child, but we shouldn’t wait for that if the kids are already at these ages. *This is the time to tell them that life is a gift from God, that our souls give us life and are the most important things we have, and that God uses the love between Mom and Dad to place a baby in the mother’s tummy, where it can grow until it is ready to be born.* We can refer to the uterus as a kind of “nest” or “cradle” where the baby is fed by being connected to its mother, and if she’s pregnant, mom can let the kids feel the baby moving inside her when that time comes.
- ***Ages 6-7: Tell them how the baby comes out of the mother.*** This is an especially natural topic to raise if you’re preparing for another childbirth. Most kids have the notion that Mom goes to the hospital to have the doctor cut her open and remove the baby, but we should make sure they know that this is not the normal case. We should tell them, simply and naturally, that Mom pushes the baby from her tummy, down a passage, and out through the opening by which she wets. They will probably wonder how a baby can fit through an opening so small, and we should explain to them that God has given that opening the ability to expand, like a flower blooming from a bud, to allow the baby to come out.

This is also the time for the father to emphasize to the kids the love their mother has for them in undergoing the sufferings of pregnancy and childbirth, and to drive home to his sons the deep respect and spirit of obedience they must have for their mom.

- **Ages 7-8: Begin to instruct them about the necessity of chastity.** Chastity is not something negative, prissy or cowardly. It is *“the spiritual power which frees love from selfishness and aggression...Chastity is the joyous affirmation of someone who knows how to live self-giving, free from any form of self-centered slavery.”* Therefore, everyone must live chastity, whether married or single, young or old—including kids at this age. A special concern here is the disorder of *masturbation*, which is directly opposed to chastity because it turns the child in on himself and fosters self-seeking. It is crucial that parents tell their kids to avoid this vice, which can be extremely difficult to break.

This is particularly important for fathers to go over with their sons. Dad can for the first time allude to the fact that the father has a physical role to play in the begetting of a child, and that the pleasure involved in self-stimulation or “playing with yourself” is reserved for a “special hug” between Mom and Dad in marriage; outside of that, it’s seriously wrong.

- **Ages 8-9: Unveil the father’s role in conception.** At this age, Dad can explain to his son that God has given a father the most important privilege of awakening the life of a new baby in the womb of his wife (Mom should do likewise with her daughter). He can say that dad’s deposit in mom’s a life-giving fluid or sap that is planted in the womb, and that this is accomplished by that special hug whereby the parents’ bodies adapt themselves and unite by the organs that differentiate them. He could also liken it to an injection, in that the fluid of the father passes from his organ into the mother’s womb through that same opening where the baby comes out at birth.
- **Ages 9-10: Explain virginity and the need to avoid thinking about sex for pleasure.** It is almost inevitable that our children will hear about, or know of, an unwed mother. If this is the case with any of our kids, we can take the opportunity to tell them that the power to beget children is very serious business, and that God wants it to be used only by people who are married and can take care of their children. This also will provide the opportunity to explain that “virginity” refers to a person who has not used this power, and that some people are called by God to freely renounce its use for love of Him. Note the importance of this point: *voluntary virginity is also an expression of love; indeed it is a nobler way of loving if one is called to it.*

This is also the appropriate age to caution our children to avoid conjuring up sexual images or talking about sexual matters so as to arouse passion and pleasurable sensations. The purpose here is not make the kids neurotic or to lay a guilt trip on them, but to help them see that these things *erode their freedom to love and cheapen the nobility of the act of marital love that brought them into existence.*

- **Ages 11-14: Prepare them for puberty.** We should take great care to prepare our children for the physical and emotional changes of puberty well before they begin to take place. A good rule of thumb is to do this with a daughter at her eleventh birthday, and with a son at his twelfth. In this way, they won’t be frightened or shocked by the changes they experience, and will not be discouraged from asking further questions of their parents.
- **Advise them of the changes that are coming.** Fathers should tell their sons that facial, underarm and pubic hair will appear, and that their voices will change. *They also should advise them not to be surprised if they experience an involuntary erection or a seminal discharge while sleeping.* Boys should be assured that these things are entirely normal and of no consequence, as long as they are not sought after; it is also a good time to remind them of the evils of masturbation. If they have not already done so, fathers can now begin using the proper terminology for genital organs, semen, etc.

Mothers should tell their daughters that their bodies will become rounder, their breasts will develop, and hair will appear in the underarm and pubic areas, similarly using the proper terminology. Of course, *the most important thing daughters should be prepared for is their first menstrual period; otherwise, they may experience a psychological shock that could hinder their maturation.*

- ***Explain these changes in the context of motherhood and fatherhood, and in the context of love.*** What we mean here is that the changes are preparing them to be mothers and fathers *themselves*, capable of the same sexual self-giving that resulted in their own existence, capable of engendering new life themselves if that is their vocation. This will help them make sense of and adjust to puberty.

For example, a mother might explain to her daughter that the hemorrhage normally occurring every 28 days allows a young woman to discharge the decomposed ova that are produced in her on a monthly basis and have not been fertilized by a male cell from a father. She should also instruct her daughter in the details of hygiene required and tell her how long this discharge should last. Fathers should give their sons a general summary of the menstruation process, as well.

This is also the time for the appropriate parent to review in further detail with the child the special embrace of marital intercourse, to make sure they understand the unique dignity and complementarity of this act of love.

- ***Teach them the importance of modesty and of guarding their hearts and senses.*** “Modesty is not contempt for the body: it is respect for our human dignity.” Put another way, modesty is the virtue by which a person preserves his or her *intimacy* until it is appropriate to share it with others. Education in modesty goes hand-in-glove with education in human sexuality.

Mom should explain to her daughter that this is why she must always dress modestly—even at home. No low necklines, tight sweaters, short skirts, short shorts or provocative swimsuits! She should clearly understand that a young man is much more stimulated by what he sees than a young woman is, and that modesty in dress is necessary to avoid presenting a temptation to him to trample on her (and his own) intimacy. *Especially in the teenage years, the father should reinforce these standards of modesty with his daughter, and should caution her about the predatory behavior young men can exhibit.* Fathers must not underestimate the moral influence they can have on their daughters during this time.

Another point for Mom to emphasize is her daughter’s proper reaction to the desires she will have for the company of boys and for their noticing her and complimenting her. The daughter must understand that, while these feelings are normal, giving in to them can be vain and conceited and lead to flirtatious behavior.

As to his son, Dad can feel free to speak very frankly with him about the need for modesty and for respecting the modesty of young women. He should tell the boy in no uncertain terms that he must stop looking or thinking about anything that is sexually provocative the second he realizes that he is having a physical reaction genitally, and that in the first instance, he should do all he can to avoid these situations. Dad should also show his son that giving in to any of these desires is essentially regarding a woman as a *thing*, an object for his own gratification, and that this type of behavior would betray all that Mom and Dad’s love for each other stands for.

- ***At an appropriate interval after these conversations, make sure our adolescent children are aware of the abuses of human sexuality.*** This is a delicate area, of course, but once we’re reasonably confident that we have instilled the proper principles in our kids, we should let them know that there are a variety of ways people misuse this powerful gift of God. In particular, they should be aware of premarital relations, adultery and homosexual behavior. We should also explain to them how all these abuses have at their core a rejection of sexuality as an expression of authentic, committed love, the main proof of which is self-giving openness to new life.

Finally, always remember that if your children have confidence in you—if you strive always to be their friends, leading them along the same paths of love that you are struggling to follow with God’s help—they will have confidence in you and will honor the principles you have instilled in them, no matter what obstacles and dangers they may encounter.

Sources:

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Further recommended reading:

West, *Good News about Sex and Marriage*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor Michigan (2000).