



The Natural Birth of SEX EDUCATION

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IN RECENT years the public schools have assumed more and more responsibility for the welfare of American children. Educators have been applauded for their willingness to assume responsibilities heretofore considered to be duties of the home. Rarely, if ever, has the assumption of any duty met with the widespread controversy faced by the suggested incorporation of sex education into the public school programs.

Across the nation the topic of sex education in public schools has been debated in homes, PTA groups, women's clubs, church groups, school board meetings, and elections and legislative committees. Court suits petitioning that the topic be banned have been filed.¹ Legislatures have been requested to withhold state funds from schools presenting sex education courses.² Opposition has ranged from charges that school officials forget that the children still belong to the parents and that imparting of sex information is the parents' prerogative to accusations that such courses are lewd and vulgar and that proponents of these public school programs are Communists aiming at undermining the morals of the youth of our nation.

In some areas educators have bowed to the pressure of the opposition and abandoned the sex education programs in their schools. In other districts school officials are continu-

ing against loud opposition. A brief glance at some recent statistics indicates why some school administrators feel it is imperative that they proceed with plans for including sex education in their school programs despite strong opposition.

Current Trends

Recently American society has been described as being "obsessed with sex." Current books, magazines, movies, theater productions, and TV programs and commercials are heavily laden with highly suggestive material. Sex is discussed openly in mixed groups. Sexuality is constantly before American youth in a degree to which it has never been before. Keeping young people ignorant on the subject of sex is a Victorian ideology. Nonreaders, non-thinkers, non-learners we may have, but today's youth is *not* "non-sexed."

Let us take a further look at the current trends which have taken place while sex education has been left primarily in the hands of the parents. According to "SIECUS," 82 percent of today's youths are receiving their sex education outside the home. This information is coming from unreliable and overstimulating sources.³ The National Center

³ Helen Manley. *A Curriculum Guide in Sex Education*. St. Louis: State Publishing Co., Inc., 1969. p. 11.

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¹ "Sex Education: New Target for Attack." *Education U.S.A.*, January 27, 1969. p. 115.

² *Des Moines Register*, February 7, 1969.

for Health Statistics reports that the number of illegitimate births has tripled during the past 25 years—making up 7 percent of all live births in 1965.⁴ An annual increase of 30,000 pregnant, unmarried teen-agers is predicted for the current ten-year period.⁵

Syphilis among teen-agers has increased 225 percent since 1956, according to the 1968 report by the National Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta, Georgia.⁶ The 1967 report⁷ from that center states that the number of cases of gonorrhea has increased 74 percent in the past decade. Ruth Link⁸ states, "One serious negative result of greater sexual freedom is the undeniable increase in venereal disease, particularly gonorrhea. . . ."

Formal Classes—The Answer?

Can an organized course in sex education, presented in a public school classroom, stem the tide? If by "sex education" we mean imparting a knowledge of the proper nomenclature for the sex organs; a knowledge of the mechanics of the sex act; or the knowledge of the development and birth of a baby, interspersed with grave warnings of the embarrassment and heartache of an illegitimate pregnancy or the ravages of venereal diseases, the answer is "No!" Let us not be so naïve. The problem goes much deeper than this—the answers must go deeper still.

Obviously, some knowledge of the physiological aspects of sex will be included. With this knowledge must be presented the obligation of each individual to become a worthy citizen through:

1. The acceptance of sex as a normal and basic aspect of human relationships

⁴ "Illegitimacy Triples in 25 Years." *Phi Delta Kappan* 49 (9): 500; May 1968.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Basic Statistics on the Venereal Disease Problem in the United States." *V.D. Fact Sheet*. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968. (Twenty-fifth Edition.) p. 12.

⁷ "Report of the Venereal Disease Program." Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1967. p. 1.

⁸ Ruth Link. "Everyone Is Curious (Sex)." *Now* 3 (6): 44; June 1969.

2. The building of healthy attitudes toward human relationships based on respect for the physical, mental, and emotional health of other individuals

3. The building of a healthful respect for one's own body and emotions

4. The security and joy of being a part of and helping build a healthy, happy, strife-free family life.

Training youth to accept these responsibilities and meet these obligations is undeniably a big order—probably too big for a single institution, be it the home, the school, the church, or community organization, to tackle alone. Max Rafferty⁹ asks, "How can the school unilaterally solve a problem which originates outside the schools and which permeates society as a whole?"

John McCaw¹⁰ upholds sex education as a responsibility of the home "supplemented by the church and complemented by the school." He believes sex education should be a part of teaching a "total concept of life."

Any school administrator deciding to accept the responsibility of helping the youth of his community to see the relationship of a healthy sexual attitude to a secure, well-adjusted life must tread slowly. In considering the questions of What? By whom? To whom? When? How? How much? educators cannot afford to ignore a very large, very interested segment of the community population—the parents. The school administrator who decides that formal sex education shall be taught in his school must realize that he is indeed dealing in an area "so charged with emotional dynamite that if the parental community is not consulted, the administrator can be dynamited right out of his job."¹¹

The Preschool Years

Therefore, it would appear plausible that the first concern of the school adminis-

⁹ "The Case Against Sex Education." Washington, D.C.: American Education Lobby. p. 4.

¹⁰ *Des Moines Register*, September 6, 1969.

¹¹ A. Gray Thompson and Edward F. Deroche. "Sex Education: Parent Involvement in Decision Making." *Phi Delta Kappan* 49 (9): 501; May 1968.

trator in designing a sex education program would be that of parent education. Any parent who fears that the schools may take the sex education of his child out of his hands forgets that he has had a very important five-year head start on the school.

By the time a child enters school, his parents have had abundant opportunities to initiate, consciously or unconsciously, a good background of sex education by their attitudes. Some of the most potent aspects of sex education are those experienced through nonverbal channels. Among these are:

1. The way parents dress their boy or girl
2. The way parents play with their boy or girl
3. The games parents provide for their boy or girl
4. The adult attitude as the child explores his own body
5. The adult attitude on toilet training
6. The adult attitude as the child exposes his body
7. The parental reactions to questions concerning sex
8. The parental reactions to boy and girl associations
9. The adult relationship with members of the opposite sex
10. The adult relationship between husband and wife.

Responsibility to Parents

For the uninformed parent, the easily embarrassed parent, or the unconcerned parent, the healthy development of these early attitudes may not be easy. Nevertheless parents can scarcely choose whether or not they will be responsible for their child's early sexual conditioning. They choose only whether it shall be a positive or negative approach.

Perhaps here is the first step to be taken by the schools—helping parents to help themselves present healthy, emotionally well-balanced attitudes during the preschool years. This may be accomplished through making available thorough adult education courses which actively involve both parents. PTA

study groups or Parent Education Groups, including parents of preschoolers, provide excellent opportunities for training parents in forming healthy sex attitudes early in the child's life.

This involvement should aid parents in developing confidence and ease in discussing with their children what previously may have been a difficult and embarrassing topic for them.

In addition to these parental instruction groups, a library of books, pamphlets, records, films, and other audio-visual aids should be available for parental examination at school. Parents should also be encouraged to check out these media for use in the home with the children when the need arises. Well qualified, thoroughly prepared teachers should be available to aid parents in the presentation of sex education information and in the use of educational media.

Responsibility to Students

Critical examination of the material presented as sex education in many schools in the past years shows a reason for the need to reorganize these courses.

A pitfall which seems to plague organized sex education programs in many schools is that of "mass education." In an era when "individualized instruction," capitalizing on the "teachable moment," and "taking the child from where he is" are in vogue, it seems incongruous to present sex education as a mass showing of a film on menstruation to all fifth- and sixth-grade students or the dangers of premarital sex relations to high school students. For some this is too early, for some too late, for some too little, and for some too much.

Timing is of utmost importance in this area of education—perhaps more so than most others. Care should be taken to present the information when the student is ready—physically, mentally, emotionally mature enough to handle it—and then only in doses small enough for him to handle.

Organized sex education classes must be kept small. Students and teachers must have the opportunity to become well ac-

quainted. In Swedish schools,¹² where sex education has been obligatory for 20 years, it is emphasized that basic information not be introduced until teachers and pupils are well acquainted.

Material presented at the lower grade levels should be kept general in nature and informal in presentation, tied in smoothly with other subject areas.

In upper grades, when formal classes replace informal learning, special attention must be given to selection of instructors for these classes. This teacher must be carefully chosen and well prepared, and he must be able to present the subject to both students and parents with ease and understanding. As a person and instructor he must be worthy of the confidence and respect of his students.

Involving Parents

Just as the schools must become involved in aiding parents in their presentation of early sex education, educators must see the value of involving parents in planning the sex education program within the school. Not only does parental involvement in planning the educational program ensure the goodwill of its supporters and make available their ideas and suggestions; it gives opponents the opportunity to voice their objections and to help design a curriculum that does

¹² See Ruth Link, *op. cit.*

not violate their guidelines. Sympathetic understanding of dissenters' objections and conscientious consideration of their ideas may serve to make them supporters. A thorough understanding of what will be presented, prior to its implementation, may serve to allay the fears of the reluctant.

Value should be gained from the knowledge, on the part of both parents and students, that parents are familiar with and actively involved in the content of sex education courses. In addition to making it easier for parents to reinforce and supplement the information presented by the school, this involvement should serve to improve communication between parents and children on the subject of sex. Many problems of the past have been created, directly or indirectly, by the "generation-communication gap."

Likewise, working closely with the teachers who will be participating in sex education instruction will give parents the opportunity to know these people and be aware of their abilities and qualifications. Parents must have confidence in the teachers and consider them partners in answering students' questions.

While parental involvement in sex education may not lead to a permanent cease-fire, it will, at any rate, gather the interested parties around the conference table.

Sex created the family—proper sex education can preserve the family. □

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