

Fostering Positive Sexuality

Teachers can help children and teens sort out their feelings about sexuality by helping them make connections between their studies and their lives.

PEGGY BRICK

It's inevitable: every teacher is a sexuality educator. In every classroom teachers give sexual messages as students learn how the teacher acts as a male or female; how the teacher responds to sex-related behaviors, comments, innuendos, jokes; and what is expected of them because they are male or female. But while every teacher influences students' sexual learning, few teachers acknowledge this role—or make the most of it.

Nor do they find much support in the curriculum. In the elementary grades, formal sex education often consists of a sex-segregated lesson on menstruation for girls (still often medicalized by having it presented by the nurse) and little or nothing for boys. In secondary schools, sex education is commonly relegated to health courses. Often sandwiched between lessons on the dangers of drugs and alcohol, it follows a similar prevention model that focuses on the dangers of sex.

Almost never are curriculum and instruction designed with a positive approach to sexuality: acknowledging pleasure as well as danger; accepting sexuality as a normal part of life; promoting attitudes, values, and behaviors that will be conducive to healthy, happy adult sexual functioning. Given the confusion of sexual scripts besieging children and youth in today's society, we need a radically changed—a holistic—approach to sex education. This approach eschews moralizing and simplis-

tic solutions ("Just say no!") and educates students about the complex historical, social, and personal dimensions of sexuality. It means integrating positive sexuality education into the *entire* school experience.

Recognizing Teachable Moments

To begin with, elementary teachers need to realize that sexual learning does occur under their care. When they respond to children's healthy curiosity about how their bodies work, why boys and girls are different, how babies grow and are born, they give the children messages—either positive or negative—about themselves as sexual beings.

Teachers can use countless "teachable moments" to impart knowledge, challenge false assumptions, and encourage thoughtfulness about sex-related behaviors. At these times, their positive responses will lay the foundation for sexual health and self-esteem by helping children feel good about adults who are willing to help them figure things out.

For example, when a 5-year-old boasts, "There's a baby growing in my mommy's tummy!" a teacher might respond with "Yes! And the name of the special place in the mother where the baby grows is called the *uterus*. Can you say, 'uterus'?" When a 10-year-old seems distressed at her early sexual development, that teacher can provide her with information about puberty and the different normal rates of development.

When 6th graders label a classmate "fag," the teacher can initiate a brief discussion about slang words, how it *feels* to be called names, and *why* people put others down like this.

Thus, teacher training, not curriculum development, is what's essential for positive sexual learning. Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own sexual learning and to know the basic facts about children's sexual development and signs of disturbance in that development; and they need to rehearse their responses to children's questions and behaviors to become comfortable with and confident in their abilities to foster healthy sexual development.

Learning to Make Decisions

When young children learn the basics—accurate vocabulary, the elementary facts about human growth and development, skills in asserting personal body rights—then, as adolescents, they are prepared to do the analytical thinking necessary to understand their own sexuality and the complex forces that influence it in this society. Because, unlike young people in traditional societies, whose sexual scripts provide clear parameters for sex roles and behaviors, youth in contemporary societies receive a plethora of scripts and very little guidance from adults. My colleagues and I dedicated our teaching manual:

To the young people of this nation
Who must find their way
To sexual health
In a world of contradictions—
Where media scream,
"Always say yes,"
Where many adults admonish,
"Just say no,"
But the majority
Just say . . .
Nothing!

Do You Know What Your Students Are Thinking?

Carole Perlman, director of the Bureau of Student Testing in the Chicago Public Schools, and Michael Benson, an obstetrician/gynecologist on the faculty of the Northwestern University Medical School, have developed and tested the Non-Cognitive Assessment Survey, a 69-item multiple choice questionnaire that measures both desired and undesired behavior among 6th-12th grade students. The 40-minute survey measures behaviors and attitudes concerning sexuality, substance abuse, gang participation, and television viewing habits.

The measure is designed to help educators get a clear picture of how students spend their time and what they think about when they are not in the classroom, on the premise that behav-

ior and attitude are just as important a consideration in fine-tuning curriculum as cognitive test scores. The survey was given to 1,500 students in Chicago and New York public schools and 500 incarcerated juvenile delinquents in Los Angeles.

Grant money is now being sought to administer the survey at no charge to as many as 10,000 students during the 1991-92 school year. These resources will be applied on a first-come, first-served basis. When outside funding ceases, the NCAS will be available to school officials for \$1-\$2 per student; statistical results will be sent back to the school within six weeks.

Michael D. Benson, M.D., may be contacted at 9 Greenbriar East Deerfield, IL 60015, 708-945-1599

Surely it is time for caring adults to start talking and for schools to encourage serious discussion about sexual issues at appropriate points throughout the secondary curriculum. Opening dialogue with teens need not require major time commitments or curriculum revisions. It does require a new determination to be honest with our youth, to face with them the confusion they confront as they grow into sexual maturity.

Teachers may find this determination when they realize the dilemma young people face when the exploitative media speak and caring adults do not. They may find it when they establish rapport and truly *listen* to the lives of their students or when they have teens of their own who are sensitive to the pressures that surround them. Once teachers find the determination, they may become advocates for teaching authentically about the realities of adolescent lives. Often, by persuasion and by example, they convince both parents and administrators.

Sexuality in Literature

All teachers are "sex educators," but

there are two disciplines where the absence of sex-related discussion can occur only by deliberate avoidance—English and social studies/history. In fact, most of us probably know an English or social studies teacher who is a sexuality educator in the most profound sense. I know one English teacher who developed a course, "Adolescence in Literature," in which adolescent sexuality was presented within the context of the whole of an adolescent's life. Students arrived at my class from this teacher's, excitedly debating the behaviors of various characters; the relationships the characters had with each other, their parents, and other adults; and ideas of masculinity and femininity. Sex was not segregated for special treatment, it was incorporated into a search for understanding of self.

When the sex-educator function of English teachers is recognized, they can deliberately help adolescents make connections between their studies and their lives. To achieve this, schools can give teachers permission to explore sexuality issues when they arise. They can provide teachers with training to increase

their comfort in discussing sensitive topics and their knowledge of historical and cross-cultural perspectives of sexuality. They can help teachers develop their skills in facilitating discussions comparing one's own attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors with those of authors and literary characters.

For example, take *Romeo and Juliet*. How are their sexual scripts similar to and different from those of teens today? Does American society give adolescents more help growing up? *Romeo and Juliet* are seen as victims of their families' feud; are American teens victims of adult behavior? Was there any way *Romeo and Juliet* could have "saved" themselves? How about American teens?

Or take *Anne Frank*. How was the experience of puberty different for *Anne* because of her life situation? How were *Peter's* feelings similar to *Anne's*? Different? Is "first love" different today?

When one of the course objectives is that students will become aware of their own sexual values and standards, teachers can devise English assignments to examine these. For example, in interviews with grandparents or other elders, students can ask about girl/boy relationship patterns and marriage expectations. Such interviews, guaranteed to delight teens and elders alike, can be written into essays on "Adolescence: Past and Present" that require thoughtful consideration of today's sexual norms.

The Social Studies Connection

Like English, social studies and history provide so many opportunities for helping students understand themselves. I wonder how educators have managed to avoid this avenue for addressing issues of teen sexuality? Apparently, the goal has not been to help adolescents understand the social roots of their own behavior, but rather to control that behavior, primarily through promotion of abstinence—in spite of the fact that virtually all public messages to teens deny that option.

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But when the goal is to teach, not preach, social studies is where students can learn to critically examine their sexual milieu, with an eye to discovering the forces influencing their own sexual attitudes, values, and behaviors. Because our cautiously written textbooks and curriculums avoid the topic of sex in culture, history, and politics, perhaps the place to begin is with the study of current events. Here, sex is inescapable, from the latest sex abuse scandal and most recent court ruling on abortion to coverage of a gay pride march and statistics on AIDS.

Fortunately, most social studies teachers already have a pedagogy for studying controversial topics. The pedagogical model requires students to separate facts from opinion and then articulate their own opinions, based on their own values. Sex educators can expand the model to include five essential levels of learning: (1) cognitive; (2) affective, including feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and values; (3) skills, particularly communication, decision-making, assertiveness (being able to stand up for oneself and one's beliefs); (4) critical analysis (examining one's own society including media messages); and (5) action (planning how one would act in support of one's values, for example, reducing sexually transmitted disease in this community).

How would this model work if a class were studying, say, abortion? First, students would learn the facts: historical, cross-cultural, medical, legal, and economic. Second, students would identify major opinions about abortion, including groups that advocate different positions and the values underlying those positions. Next, they would investigate the opinions of their own families and religious or ethnic groups and articulate their own personal points of view. Then they might consider how they would respond if a friend told them she was pregnant and planning to have an abortion, if they were married and told that a fetus was severely deformed, if the Supreme Court ruled that abortion was illegal even in the case of incest or rape. Final-

ly, they might work in groups to develop a plan to reduce the number of abortions in the United States.

The premise underlying the study of controversial issues is that students who live in a democracy need to understand different opinions, even though they may oppose them vigorously. The essence of democracy is the right of the people to have those varied views, to express them, and to defend them.

But perhaps the most compelling reason for including sex education in social studies is the need for critical analysis of media and advertising sex messages. While researchers continue to investigate the impact of the media, including pornography, there is no doubt about the pervasiveness of the sexual scripts that invade children's consciousness from the earliest ages: violent, sexist cartoons; Barbie and Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles; soaps and MTV. Sexual images are an important part of children's lives, and they need to learn to question and challenge those images, like this:

• *What do you like about the Ninja Turtle Leonardo? What do you dislike? Would you want Raphael for a friend? How does it feel to be April?*

• *Measure Barbie—is she "real"? What would you be like if you were like Barbie?*

• *Record 10 sexual encounters on your favorite Soap. Did anyone mention birth control or "safer sex"? If not, why not? Do you think TV portrayal of sex has anything to do with why teenagers get pregnant?*

Focusing on What We Want

Once educators accept responsibility for educating children to survive in a sexually exploitative society, the opportunities for opening honest dialogue with students are omnipresent. But to begin, adults will need to think in a new way about sex education. In the past we have focused on what we *don't* want: pregnancy, abuse, sexually transmitted disease. But what *do* we want for our children's sexual futures? How can we counter destructive media images? What sexual scripts would lead to sexually healthy, happy, functioning adults? When can we answer these questions, we will have come a long way toward fostering a better future for our students. □

Brick, P., et al., (1989). *Teaching Safer Sex*. (Hackensack, N.J.: Planned Parenthood of Bergen County).

Author's note: Peggy Brick and the Center for Family Life Education publish the "Five Resources for Teaching Safer Sex" program to provide safer sex education for teens, young adults, family planning staff, educators, and parents. The resources include: (1) *Teaching Safer Sex*, a manual of 20 lessons with worksheets to help people assess and reduce risky behavior, (2) *Condom Talk*, a 4-minute video for encouraging discussion about condoms, (3) *The New Tradition: Safer Sex Counseling in Family Planning Clinics*, a complete package with a 30-minute training video to help family planning agencies integrate education about safer sex into their regular medical procedures, (4) *Positive Images: A New Approach to Contraceptive Education*, a 17-lesson manual designed to create positive attitudes toward birth control, and (5) *Sweet Away Is Not O.K.!*, a 10-minute video narrated by teens to help other teens see that they must protect themselves from exploitation and unwanted pregnancies. Brick and associates have also published *Bodies, Birth and Babies: Sexuality Education in Early Childhood Programs*. To order these resources, write to The Center for Family Life Education, Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey, 575 Main St., Hackensack, NJ 07601.

Peggy Brick is Director, Center for Family Life Education, Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey, 575 Main St., Hackensack, NJ 07601.

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