What's wrong with sex education?

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Sex education is intended to equip the young with knowledge and understanding of sexuality, so that they may join in its expression without guilt, fear or danger. Too often it amounts to moral propaganda, seeking to discourage all forms of sexual activity among the unmarried.

Despite wide recognition of the need for sex education there is a great reluctance on the part of parents and teachers to undertake it. Parents are handicapped by their own lack of sex education which, in many cases, has left them ignorant of anything more than a few basic facts. Even in those cases where parents have acquired detailed sexual knowledge, they often find that their emotional involvement with their children prevents them from discussing the subject. Teachers are less emotionally involved with the children, but more often than not suffer from the same ignorance and embarrassment.

What society has done is to ensure that this sexual experimentation takes place in an atmosphere of guilt, secrecy and danger.

Instead of a frank recognition of the needs of teenage sexuality, society condemns all forms of sexual expression for the unmarried – even masturbation. A hundred years ago, self-stimulation was said to be a 'secret vice' and those practising it were threatened with fearful consequences, ranging from blindness to insanity.

Today we know that there are no grounds for such an attitude. Self-stimulation is universally practised and is quite harmless, providing that those doing it are not subjected to moralistic disapproval. Condemnation of this practice creates and encourages feelings of guilt and anxiety which may impair sexual adjustment. It should therefore be one of the tasks of sex education to reassure the young that there is no harm in their enjoyment of self-stimulation. Many of the latest books of sex education, however, are still creating fears and fostering guilt.

In *Your Guide to the Opposite Sex* (Pitman, 1969), Pauline Perry states that there are 'two dangers in masturbation as a frequent practice'. (She does not say what 'frequent' means.) 'Firstly, it is liable to become a secretive and furtive thing, and can give a boy the association of sex with guilty and unhappy feelings. Secondly... in adult life, and in marriage, the boy who masturbates may find himself unable to receive satisfaction in the sexual act.' Since 'frequently' is not defined, any reader may fear that he is in that category, and in this way writers help to

Moral propaganda

What sex education is given usually consists of moral propaganda which is designed to persuade young people that they should postpone all sex experience until after marriage. Within this framework young people are taught as few facts as possible, and information is deliberately withheld or distorted, in order to reinforce this ban on pre-marital sex. This judgement is based on a careful examination of syllabuses, radio and television broadcasts for schools, and – in particular – a large number of the books and pamphlets which are frequently handed out to the young as a substitute for a frank discussion of sex.

Children and teenagers are, meanwhile, eager for the facts, but aware of the taboos that still persist in adult society, and consequently uncertain where to turn for information and help. It is obvious that their lack of knowledge does not prevent sexual experimentation. The majority of young people are having sexual experiences. This has always been the case, and it seems that there is nothing society can do to prevent this.
create those same 'guilty and unhappy feelings' which are the cause of the trouble.

A similar approach can be found in The Facts of Sex (MacGibbon & Kee, 1969), which describes itself as a 'revolutionary approach to sex instruction for teenagers'. Its author, John James, says of masturbation, 'the habit can become a drug and the masturbator may get hooked. The more it is performed, the more difficult it may become to stop doing it and so it is better not to start, even though the fear and shame of it is far worse than the thing itself.' It seems that this book is not so 'revolutionary' after all.

**No evidence**

James Bevan, the author of Sex, The Plain Facts (Faber, 1970), spreads the alarming idea that if a girl masturbates by 'the thigh-rubbing method', 'she may find it difficult to open her legs and obtain excitement from coitus'. The author provides no evidence to support this extraordinary threat.

It seems certain that the earliest sexual experiences are usually of self-stimulation, but before long most boys and girls wish to extend their sexual knowledge and to share their sexual experiences. Petting is a natural way of doing this, and should be a delightful source of sexual experience. As such we should perhaps be encouraging love-play. Instead, as with self-stimulation, sex educators attempt to persuade the young to resist all temptation, and warn them that the practice of petting is harmful.

In A Young Person's Guide to Life and Love (Bodley Head, 1971), Dr. Benjamin Spock appears to recommend that teenagers should not pet until they are 18 or 19 and even then he thinks 'it's sensible for a teenager not to go beyond kissing and embracing the person he loves until there is some kind of commitment to marriage'. This advice is backed by the sinister warning that it is based on 'tragic cases encountered in medical practice'. Meanwhile the majority of young people continue to indulge in such 'tragic practices' and survive.

In A Parent's Guide to Sex Education (Corgi, 1968), Clarie Rayner wrote that a girl who pets 'may eventually become cold and unresponsive in her lovemaking – even frigid'. Here again, we see that this could create those very fears which may cause such problems as frigidity.

Intercourse is, of course, also proscribed. This prohibition is usually backed up by warnings about illegitimacy and VD. Despite this apparent concern about these risks, many sex educators seem strangely reluctant to provide practical help. The county of Wiltshire's scheme of Education for Personal Relationships (1971) provides an outstanding example of the common evasion of the responsibility to give education in contraception.

The scheme states, 'In mentioning mechanical methods it is important that they [the pupils] should realise that these are not reliable unless correctly used... Telling children about contraception in this way should not be confused with giving instruction in the use of birth control. There is no question that teachers should be expected to do this.' In other words, young people must be told of the dangers, but the information they need in order to avoid these dangers is to be withheld.

The problem of VD is a serious one, but it is aggravated by the inadequate nature of most sex education. Young people are not given enough information about the symptoms, transmission and treatment of these diseases. The Health Education Council's research indicates that 'well over 50% of young people show a complete misunderstanding about VD'. (Baroness Birk, House of Lords, 11/5/70).

Wide-spread ignorance of the symptoms helps to explain the high VD rate. But present sex education contributes to the spread of these diseases in another crucial way.

**As long as sex education consists of pious, moral injunctions, and as long as the facts are twisted and concealed to suit this purpose, then we cannot blame the young for disregarding warnings about VD.**

They are told so many half-truths and blatant falsehoods, that many of them disbelieve all that they are taught about sex. No wonder many young people do not take the possibility of infection very seriously. This is a direct consequence of the attitude of mistrust which adult society has created in the young. Is it not time for us to be honest with them?

It is ironic that those who are the first to throw up their hands in horror at the latest VD, illegitimacy or abortion figures, are also often the first to oppose any attempt to give practical advice and help to the young.

How can sex education face its responsibilities? First, it must face reality. Sex should be seen for what it is, a normal and delightful aspect of human behaviour. Sex education should then make as its aim
the helping of the young to know about and to understand sexuality, so that they may join in its expression without guilt, fear or danger. If this aim is to be fulfilled, then we should teach the young, at the appropriate ages, the physical, psychological and social facts about sexual development, variations of sexual expression, reproduction, contraception, abortion, diseases and the various problems that young people encounter as their bodies develop.

It is sometimes maintained that such a scheme would ignore feelings and emotions. But these too are facts, and should be treated as such, instead of which at present they are largely ignored, falsely-romanticised or dismissed with classic under-statement — sexual excitement, for example, where it is mentioned at all, is likely to be summed up like this: 'Intercourse is accompanied by pleasurable feelings.'

All these facts should be explained as clearly as possible, and teachers should not hesitate to illustrate these facts, particularly with photographs, slides and films. Not only do photographs usually convey more information than sketches or diagrams, but they also have the advantage of communicating a guilt-free attitude. Photographs of, for example, self-stimulation, help to convey recognition of the fact that this practice is normal and not something of which to be ashamed.

This is not to say, of course, that sketches and diagrams have no role to play; they have their uses—for example, where photographs would not be very informative or would be impossible to take. But drawings should only be used in preference to photographs when sketches or diagrams offer the clearest illustration; they should never be used as a means of avoiding realism.

The language used for explaining sex should also be chosen with care. The scientific terms have their uses, but they can also be adopted as a means of avoiding frankness.

Scientific jargon can be as euphemistic as baby-talk, and there should be no place in sex education for the embarrassed attitude which leadsteachers to take refuge in obscure, medical terms.

The use of this kind of language must sound as prudish to the young, as the circumlocutions of the Victorians seem to us. Explanations should be given in the terms the young know and understand.

Freely available

But society's responsibility for the healthy sexual development of our young people should not be limited to providing sex education in schools. For example, it is not enough to tell the young what the best methods of contraception are; we should make these contraceptives freely available to them and we should help them if one of these methods fails.

Much of the responsibility for providing practical help and reassurance lies with the parents. It is generally agreed by psychologists that the basic features of the personality are formed in the first few years of life, before most children attend school. These early years are a time of exploration and discovery, and this includes sexual experimentation. It is harmful to punish these early sex experiences, such as infantile self-stimulation and other forms of sex-play. Parents have a great responsibility to encourage their children to have a natural and healthy attitude towards sex.

Furtive experiences

In the teenage years parents should not stop their children from being alone with their boy or girl friends, in their own homes. If young people are not able to do their love-making at home, in comfort and privacy, they will be driven out into the streets, into furtive experiences on lonely commons, in dark alleyways, or in the backs of cars. Who is to blame for the consequences?

We have inherited from previous generations a legacy of prudery, sexual guilt, and moral cant. At present society is passing this legacy on to the next generation. If we are not to perpetuate the pattern of sexual misery and guilt, we must face the facts, and recognise the sexual needs and desires of children and teenagers. We should allow them to give physical expression to their feelings and give them the knowledge and help they need to enjoy these experiences in safety, comfort and privacy.

It may be too late for adult society fully to come to terms with its own sexuality; it need not be too late for our children. Sex education is a great responsibility. It is not a responsibility which parents can pass to teachers, which teachers can leave to parents, or society can leave to chance.