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Faith Today



*A parent's view:
education in sexuality*

By David Gibson
NC News Service

Children ask the darndest questions. In fact, they begin asking them at an early age, when their parents' attention still is focused on keeping them from risking life and limb by running into the street or by swallowing a dangerous substance.

But I doubt that children's education in sexuality starts with the answers they receive from parents to probing questions about where babies come from or why their bodies are shaped as they are.

Children absorb impressions and attitudes about sexuality from their first days through the relationships and love expressed around them. And parents actually are imparting education in sexuality when they help to convey a sense of self-esteem in children, along with a respect for the dignity of others.

For "sexuality" is a term with fuller meaning than sometimes is ascribed it. What it means to be either male or female and to have one's personality and relationships

somehow shaped by that fact — all that is encompassed by the word "sexuality."

So education in sexuality begins early. And it likely takes a step forward when a child asks a pointed question or two — at the dinner table or driving home from a movie. (One of our children asked where babies come from while we were driving home from Walt Disney's "Sleeping Beauty.")

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When children approach their teen years, life becomes more complicated — for them and you.

It is now that peer pressure begins in earnest. Now is when children may place a special premium on acting older than their years. And now many

children develop more of a life away from home.

Parents sometimes feel forced to compete for their children's time and attention, even with 11- or 12-year-olds.

A parent doesn't have to be a prude to think that teens will be told by someone that sexuality and sexual activity can be treated casually.

And you don't have to be a full-time worrier to realize that children are sometimes vulnerable and impressionable. Have you met a parent yet who is comfortable with the thought that their child might be exploited or manipulated by another person?

I can barely imagine a parent who could experience a child's teen world without finding something there to react against.

FAMILY

Contrary to the beliefs of some, children learn about sexuality from the time they're born, writes David Gibson. And that education doesn't end at a certain point. It is an ongoing venture that represents a demanding challenge for today's parents.

As children near the teen years, parents often find themselves wanting to caution them, protect them, help them evaluate scenes in movies and on television or the words in some song. I think that is only natural.

The risk here for parents, it seems to me, is in allowing their role to become too narrow, restricted to reactions against events in their children's lives. When it comes to education in sexuality, the broader-based approach that began in the child's early years — an ongoing exploration of values drawing attention to the meaning of human love, the value of commitments, the complexities and rewards of lasting relationships, human worth, the purpose of emotions, the body's dignity — risks getting short-circuited.

At our house, we the parents had to take a step back — to talk about the full scope of the education in sexuality that we hoped to offer an older child.

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A parent's role is not like that of a teacher who gives instruction in long division, expecting the task to be completed at a certain point. Instead, I suspect that most "education" at home is ongoing.

This education is stimulated when children bring their questions and problems home. Parents are likely to experience genuine frustration if their children's big questions are kept from them.

In a spring 1985 message to the world's priests, Pope John Paul II asked them to be accessible to young people, to foster relationships that encourage young people to bring important matters to them. As a parent I relate to that message too.

I want my children to feel they can come home with questions and problems, expecting to be greeted with love, maturity and a willingness to spend time helping them find answers to their questions — the kinds of qualities the pope encouraged.

That atmosphere at home is needed — for the sake of ongoing education in sexuality, as well as other matters.

Like all parents, of course, I realize this is much easier said than done.

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)