

Screen depictions of sexuality

By Cindy Liebman
NC News Service

Six-year-old Shelley and her father had just finished watching "The Bill Cosby Show" and "Family Ties." That evening both programs featured expectant mothers and discussions of childbirth.

Shelley's father suspected the programs might spark his daughter's curiosity. So he talked about the episodes with her and asked whether she had any questions.

She did. "How do babies get in there?" Shelley inquired.

Her father responded honestly in a way he felt his young daughter would understand.

Two families got together one evening to watch the popular adventure movie "Romancing the Stone" on a home video recorder.

For most of the film the central characters, a man and a woman, seem to put up with one another reluctantly as they dodge villains in Colombia.

But during a moment of calm, the couple discover they are attracted to one another. Almost immediately they head for a bedroom.

The parents watching the film thought, "What message would this casual presentation of sex communicate to their children, they wondered.

Television programs, movies and popular music transmit many messages about sexuality to young people, said the Rev. Edward McNulty, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Westfield, N.Y.

Some present a responsible view, he said. But most do not reflect the Christian understanding of sexual expression, he added. Often "sex is pictured as just a

human appetite to be satisfied — as if it doesn't matter how you handle it as long as no one gets hurt."

Father Thomas Lynch, family life representative for the U.S. Catholic Conference Education Department, said the media often realistically capture patterns in human relationships. Sometimes, though, movies and TV programs "get obsessed with the genital aspect of sexuality," he observed.

Neither Mr. McNulty nor Father Lynch believe it is realistic for parents to expect to shelter children from all media exposure to sexual values that contradict the parents' own values.

But parents can help children wade through conflicting messages and form Christian values about sexuality. In some ways, television can make it easier for parents by providing discussion starters, Mr. McNulty said.

So it is important for parents to take an active leadership role in what their children see, to view

TV programs and movies with children and discuss them afterward.

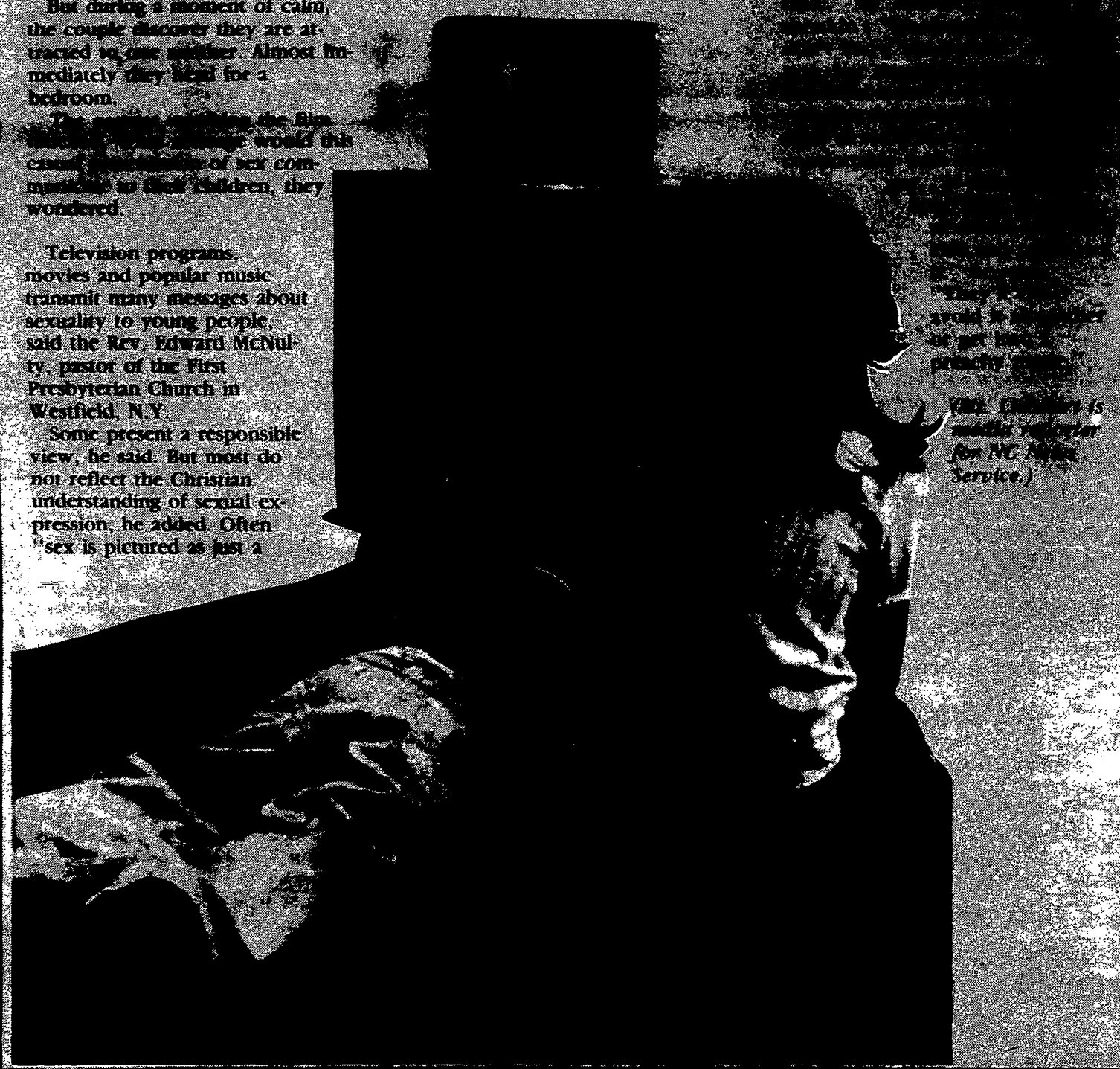
One approach is to raise critical or thoughtful questions about the issues, Father Lynch and McNulty suggested.

It is important that parents express their own views, without lecturing their children. It can even be explained that while some characters are "basically likeable," the parents do not agree with certain of their values.

When it comes to presenting church teaching about sexuality to children, Father Lynch said it is not enough for parents simply to recite moral laws without explanation. Parents need to understand why the church teaches what it does about sex and human love.

Both said parents should try to be open to questions their children raise in the normal course of family life and not evade them.

"If children bring up a question you feel uncomfortable answering, you should admit you don't know," Father Lynch said. "But you should let them know you will find out and get back to them."



When, how

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Many parents feel uncomfortable when it comes to discussing human sexuality with children, said pastoral counselor Ann Newland in an interview in her office. She works in marriage and family counseling in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

"We get much more nervous and uptight" than children do, she added, sometimes because their questions about sexuality "raise embarrassing issues from our own experience."

"But, if a parent feels uncomfortable, in my experience it's better" to tell the child so, Mrs. Newland thinks. A parent can say, "I get uncomfortable in talking about this," she suggested.

This lets the child know the topic they will discuss is delicate and serious and not to be taken lightly, she explained.

"It's helpful for the child to have a parent acknowledge these feelings," she added, since embarrassment is something every child has some experience with.

Asked what sorts of questions parents ask about discussing sexuality with children, Mrs. Newland listed the following:

- When is the appropriate time to discuss it?
- How much should I tell

Who taught

By Father John J. Castelot
NC News Service

Who taught children about sexuality in Old Testament days? This was not really much of a problem in a culture which accepted sexuality precisely as a fact of life.

People who lived close to nature, with the birthing of cows and sheep as much a part of life as the ripening of grain in the fields, did not view sex as something to snicker about or to be ashamed of.

Certainly the God who created them male and female and who in the very act of creation "blessed them, saying 'Be fertile and multiply'" (Gn. 1-27-28) — certainly such a God did not frown on love between a man and a woman.

Neither did that same God who declared: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him." (Gn. 2:18).

Still, human beings are not like the other animals. They possess intelligence and free will, with the power to use their sexuality for good or for evil. Human lives are not governed by instinct; the

They avoid it as much as they can get away with, says Father John J. Castelot, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Westfield, N.Y. (The photograph is a media release for NC News Service.)