

and how much to say?

children?

—How explicit should I be?

—Should I tell them the truth?

"Parents get in a real dilemma" at times, Mrs. Newland said. Children will ask an innocent question and parents will respond with too much information, much more than the child really wants.

The counselor recommended that in most cases parents can let the child set the pace. "I've found children ask questions when they are ready" and will absorb only as much information as they can handle, she explained.

She and her Episcopal minister husband practiced that approach with their three sons, now 26, 23 and 20. Often, Mrs. Newland said, something about sexuality came up in school or in peer groups and the boys would bring their questions home and "talk it over here."

It's important not to "scare children, to make them feel they are bad people to have curiosity or questions about human sexuality," Mrs. Newland added.

She also thinks "it's far preferable to open up communication with children and talk about sexuality so they can get their curiosity satisfied" at home. A child who can talk with parents about sexuality is less likely to "get into situations that are confusing and upsetting" later on, she said.

Father Michael Hartwig, vice rector of Holy Trinity Seminary in Irving, Texas, agrees that it's important for young people to talk about sexuality with parents and other trusted adults.

Shunting discussion of sexuality to the side can lead students to develop a "distorted view," to see sexuality as a taboo topic, he said.

Students will identify with a Christian "vision of human sexuality that makes sense," he added.

For three years Father Hartwig was involved in presenting a short course on human sexuality to eighth-graders in Tyler, Texas. The segment was taught by a team of three teachers as part of a religious education class. To build trust, parents were consulted extensively throughout, he explained.

His experience with youths has convinced Father Hartwig that dealing with human sexuality is "a central issue for an authentic Christian life."

Sexuality involves much more than how we use our reproductive organs, he indicated. "Sexuality is an integrating dimension of a person." "The way we understand our sexuality, live it and integrate it are pivotal for growth and maturity."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

children in biblical times?

responsibility of ordering those lives, including their sexuality, is real and serious.

As a result, there was need to teach children the basic goodness of sex and the importance of respecting it and using it rightly. This instruction, like all early instruction, was the province of the parents.

In biblical times, in the early years — and often into adolescence — the mother was the teacher. "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching" (Prv. 1:8).

Once they grew up, education of the boys passed to the father, that of girls to their mother.

One of the most serious parental duties was to teach the truths of religion, and this would have included instruction about sex. Given the stern strictures of the law with regard to extramarital sex, this was not a matter to be taken lightly. Parents would have been very attentive here.

Fathers, representatives of the family and fiercely jealous of its reputation, instructed the boys.

In ancient Israel girls moved about quite freely, shepherding,

drawing water from the village well which was the center of social life, harvesting in the fields.

The law had certain safeguards built in to protect women. In Old Testament times a seducer had to marry his victim, pay a higher than usual dowry and relinquish his right to divorce her (Ex. 22:15; Dt. 22:28-29).

In Jesus' day restrictions on women were somewhat tighter. When they appeared in public they were expected to be veiled and segregation of the sexes was rather rigidly enforced. It is significant that in the New Testament account of the meeting between Jesus and the woman at the well, the disciples were surprised not so much at Jesus' talking with a Samaritan as at his talking with a woman (John 4:27).

But by this time the disciples should have been accustomed to having Jesus treat women on the basis of respect for them as persons.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

How do parents teach their children?

"They're doing it all the time and in ways they don't realize," said Theodore Hengesbach, an educator at Indiana University at South Bend, Ind.

Recently, Hengesbach noticed that his daughter, Heidi, routinely cooks with her left hand on her hip. After a while it occurred to him, "She cooks just like me."

The realization was "disconcerting," the theologian admitted. "It means I'm always on display."

Rose Marie Hengesbach, a career counselor at Indiana University and former teacher, agreed that most teaching by parents is done on an informal basis and "it's fun."

Ms. Hengesbach said her daughter recently told her that a psychological test she had taken in school "showed she had some ability to be sensitive to nature." Her teen-ager then commented: "It's natural enough because you and dad were always pointing things out to us," Ms. Hengesbach reported.

The Hengesbachs think parents are most likely to feel uneasy when faced with more formal teaching in such areas as sexuality or religious doctrine.

One reason for anxiety, they think, is the difficulty of knowing if the point is getting across.

And parents worry because they aren't professional educators. It's difficult for parents to realize they "don't need to be experts who are perfectly right all the time," Ms. Hengesbach said. If a mistake is made, it can be corrected — and part of teaching children is showing them this.

What's vital, she added, is for parents to communicate "the things they think are important — their attitudes about values, about people. You need to put it into words or children won't know" what their parents value, Ms. Hengesbach said.

She and her husband sometimes used games as teaching tools. She explained how they would draw up an imaginary case, perhaps involving an incident of stealing. Then they'd ask their children: "What would you do if you saw..."

The advantage of such a game is that "it gives parents an opportunity to talk about the thinking process that goes into decisions," Ms. Hengesbach said. Children need to know that making decisions is "a step-by-step process."

Ms. Hengesbach suggests that people should "approach parenting with a sense of humor and with humility."

Why humility? Because "you don't know how children are going to turn out," she said.

...for discussion

1. How do parents teach their children — not just about sexuality, but about anything at all? What are some occasions when parents are "teaching"?

2. Taken in its broadest sense, what does the word "sexuality" mean?

3. Do you think it is difficult to speak with children about sexuality? Why?

4. What sorts of attitudes and values do you hope your children will learn from you concerning sexuality?

5. Children today receive many conflicting messages about sexuality, human love and marriage from friends, movies, TV programs and popular songs. Can you help your children sort through these conflicting messages? How?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Parents Talk Love: The Catholic Family Handbook About Sexuality" by Susan Sullivan and Father Matthew Kawiak. "Parents who encourage attitudes of respect, dignity and responsibility in sexual relationships give their children a precious gift," the authors write in this information-packed book. The single most important step "in talking about sex with anyone, young children, teens or young adults, is simply to open one's mouth to begin the process," they add. The authors have developed programs and led numerous workshops on sexuality. The book is designed for use by individuals, couples or parish groups. Chapters include a discussion of common myths about sexuality, how parents can use television to talk about values, the importance of intimacy in sexual learning and how to talk about sex with children at different ages. (Paulist Press, 997 Macarthur Blvd., Mahwah, N.J. 07430. 1985. \$7.95.)