

Teach & Talk

The Subject Is Sex



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ETR Associates (Education, Training and Research) is a nonprofit organization committed to fostering the health, well-being and cultural diversity of individuals, families, schools and communities. ETR Associates is a leading producer of comprehensive health education curricula and resources that empower students in grades K–12 with the information and skills to make positive health choices. Learn more about our high-quality materials by contacting us at 1-800-321-4407 or visiting our website at www.etr.org/pub.

Portions of *Teach & Talk: The Subject Is Sex* are based on *When Sex Is the Subject* by Pamela Wilson.

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How to Use This Book

When you think about teaching sexuality in your elementary classroom what comes to mind? If you're like a lot of teachers, you might feel anxiety more than anything else. Perhaps visions of disapproving administrators, angry parents or confused kids dance in your head. There's no question that talking about sexuality with elementary school students can be challenging.

If you're a teacher, you have a good sense of the issues that can arise when sexuality is addressed frankly in the elementary classroom. If a program is well designed and appropriately presented, some parents will support it. Others will not, no matter what. Some administrators might like the idea of sexuality education but worry about the public relations consequences.

Some districts have clear policies and programs in place; others do not. Community members with no direct relationship to the school have been known to protest vehemently when sexuality education is offered. In this maelstrom of opinion and consequence, many teachers understandably feel it's safest to avoid the issue altogether.

But you *can* provide progressive, quality sexuality education to elementary school students without breaking your school or district's rules, alienating parents or leaving children stranded and confused. This book offers ways to address sexuality effectively and appropriately in the elementary classroom. It focuses on ideas that are practical, engaging and fun, and presents guidelines and suggestions that should work and be acceptable in a wide range of communities, from the most conservative to the most progressive.

How to Use This Book

Be sure you know your own school or district's guidelines for sexuality education. If there is a specific health or sexuality curriculum in place, become familiar with its form and content. If your school or district has an advisory group on sexuality education, learn what its recommendations and actions have been. An organized program of sexuality education, for any grade, should be pursued only with administrative and parental support.

When you have this knowledge of your school's guidelines firmly in place, this book can help you:

- **Get background information and learn new concepts.** This book will help you think about sexuality education in some new ways. You will learn how you can share healthy messages with your students about sexuality, in age-appropriate and effective ways, within the guidelines set by your school or district.
- **Find out more about kids' questions and concerns on sexuality.** Children ask these questions all the time. Some questions they state directly. Others are implied through behaviors and attitudes. You can hear and respond to both kinds of questions.
- **Learn effective, powerful ways to answer kids' questions about sexuality.** You can give your students answers that will help them develop skills and attitudes they can use right now. You can also begin to build foundations that can help them become sexually healthy adults in the future.
- **Shape the peer environment in your own classroom to promote healthy development and behaviors in your students.** Working with peers offers students some of the most powerful opportunities to commit themselves to healthy values and appropriate behaviors.
- **Use strategies for keeping parents involved in the learning and supportive of your efforts.** When parents partner with schools in sexuality and health education, classroom learning is strengthened. Parents are the primary sexuality educators of children, and they appreciate the school's validation of their essential role.

- **Think about ways to reinforce important concepts related to sexuality education throughout the curriculum.** General suggestions are found in the main text, and Appendix B gives some specific examples by subject area.

Once you become familiar with the approach in this book, much of the apprehension and anxiety that can sometimes accompany discussions of sexuality education will be lifted. In its place you'll have a sense of direction and confidence. You'll see that you can offer your students a wide range of valuable learning that leads to healthy attitudes and important skills. You'll know that you're reaching your students at age-appropriate levels. And, because kids enjoy this material, you'll enjoy teaching it.

1 Children and Sexuality Education

When it comes to **sexuality**, we are all living with contradictions. Most people think of sexuality as something intensely personal and private. It's a subject they want to address thoughtfully and with respect. But we are walking through a world that literally bombards us with sexual imagery and ideas.

Sexuality is all around us—in books, movies, advertising, magazine covers, music. It's become part of the background noise of everyday life, and adults are presented with sexual images and ideas in some of the most public and casual settings imaginable.

Children are living in this same world. Teachers and parents want to bring special care and attention to the teaching of sexuality because it's such an important topic. But the truth is that children are surrounded by and learning about sexuality in the same way adults are. They have been gathering information at many different levels, from all kinds of sources, in an ongoing process since they were infants.

This shouldn't really surprise us. It's the way children learn about other things, too. Take a spelling lesson for example. The topic may be spelling, but a lot more than this week's word list shapes what happens in the classroom.

Students have come to some conclusions about how to behave during this time of study. Their actions are guided by past experiences, current expectations and what they anticipate is going to happen over the next few moments, hours or days. These influences affect how they respond to their teacher, treat their peers, and how seriously they take the subject of spelling.

What do their parents think about school in general? How do their parents respond when asked for help on spelling homework? What are the teacher's expectations for classroom conduct during the spelling lesson? What does the teacher say throughout the day about words, spelling and clear communication? What relevance does spelling have to students' lives, and who helps them recognize its relevance?

Anyone can give a child correct information about how to spell a word. But a professional teacher knows that a child's learning about spelling, or any other topic, involves much more than the specific lesson at hand. That's why teachers make the effort to be conscious of all the different messages their students encounter about spelling. These messages are there whether teachers notice them or not. But when teachers do notice, their work can be much more effective.

Issues of sexuality in the elementary classroom are a lot like this spelling lesson example. Past experience, school policies, community issues and teachers' personal values contribute to the messages students gather about sexuality. So do students' own experiences, values and beliefs.

Some people say it's not necessary to talk about sexuality with children in early elementary grades. But learning about sexuality, like learning about spelling, is going on all the time. The question isn't whether children are going to be exposed to ideas about sexuality at these ages—they already are. The question is whether their parents and teachers are going to help them learn the kinds of things that will help them be confident, safe and healthy in their current and future lives.

Will they be given the skills they need to set personal limits, make smart choices and find answers? Will they be encouraged to feel pride and joy in their physical bodies, and pleasure and reward in their emotional lives? These are no small things in a culture that often places far too much emphasis on adult sexuality and too little on the tasks and interests of childhood.

Whole-Person Sexuality

Most educators in the field of human sexuality make an important distinction between “sex education” and “sexuality education.”

Sex education implies a focus on the mechanics of sexual behavior. What is intercourse? How is an STD passed from one person to another? How does pregnancy occur? What is a condom? What is a vulva?

But *sexuality* encompasses much more than sexual function. Sexuality addresses how people feel about their bodies, how they experience intimacy, and what their expectations are of men and women, boys and girls. It involves considerations of responsibility, morality and personal values. It includes the areas of personal boundaries, communication styles, consent and respect for others. Sexuality educator Debra Haffner (1999) says, “Sexuality is about who we are as men and women, not about what we do with a part of our bodies.”

Early elementary school students are learning about sexuality every day. They learn by relating to peers, being exposed to various media, interacting with teachers and parents, noticing how their questions are answered, and seeing how adults treat one another. You can use creative and appropriate classroom strategies that will help students learn in productive and positive ways, build their self-esteem and instill confidence in their whole beings.

This perspective of “whole-person sexuality” is the kind of sexuality education you want to provide to your early elementary students. It isn’t necessary to violate school or district guidelines to do this, and you needn’t put yourself at personal risk of controversy. Children have many questions about sexuality, so you will want to be familiar with your school’s guidelines for discussing these topics. But the broader perspective of what children are learning about sexuality—the whole-person approach—involves foundations that almost every parent, every teacher and every administrator will support.

Where Do Children Learn About Sexuality?

Children learn about sexuality when they talk to friends, watch TV, listen to music or navigate the Internet. Sexuality education is happening when they observe adults, and when they notice their own emotions and physical sensations.

Parents

Parents are far and away the most important sexuality educators in children's lives, starting from when they first respond to their new baby. Are they enchanted by the arrival of their little girl? Are they proud of the vigor of their little boy? Do they cuddle their child often? How do they dress their infant?

What feelings about bodies and bodily functions do parents communicate when they change the infant's diapers? Is this a time of embarrassment or discomfort? of affection and pleasure? of a matter-of-fact taking care of business?

As children grow, their families continue to teach them about sexuality, particularly as toddlers begin to learn words for their body parts. Virtually all children use the same words for the eyes, ears, hands and feet. But families use a wide range of terms for the genitals. Do little boys learn to refer to their penis or their "wee-wee"? Do girls say vulva or "tee-tee"? Often girls are taught no words at all for their genitals. What does the family's language tell children about these parts of the bodies that are so closely related to sexual identity?

By the time children enter school, they have learned other important things from their family environment. Is privacy respected in the home? Is masturbation frowned upon? Are girls treated with respect? Are boys expected to always be strong? Can children reach out comfortably for a hug or a kiss from their mom? from their dad? Do older siblings protect younger ones and watch out for them, or is there a pattern of intimidation or indifference?

The influence of family is deep and powerful in the development of a child's sense of his or her sexual self.

Peers

Second to parents, peers provide a great deal of information—and misinformation—about sexuality. They tell jokes, use popular slang and engage in behaviors that reveal and promote a variety of attitudes about sexuality. How do boys treat girls in the school? What does a girl do when a boy she likes teases her? How does an in-group of slightly rebellious fourth grade boys respond to an offensive joke about dumb blondes?

Media

Children also learn about sexuality from the media. They see children's TV, afternoon soap operas, talk shows, evening sitcoms, news shows, movies, print ads, teen magazines, music videos and commercials. They see sex ads, and sometimes sexually explicit sites, on the Internet. Even very young children sometimes have access to adult cable stations, where they may see graphic sexual behaviors.

Media messages are loaded with sexual content. Children's cartoons and, more important, commercial messages during cartoon hours give definite messages about gender role behaviors—how boys and girls should act, or what toys are appropriate for boys or girls.

Adult programming, which young children often watch, is filled with messages—some clear, some ambiguous; some sensitive, some irresponsible—about many complex topics related to sexuality. Children see programs that depict men and women treating each other with respect, or in ways that are demeaning or degrading. They hear about having sex on a first date, transsexualism, or being pregnant. They might hear explicit discussions of the sexual behavior of political leaders or music idols. They might be troubled by a report about a gay-related hate crime or concerned by a story about divorced parents arguing about the fate of stored embryos.

Community

As children grow older, they participate more in the larger community. They may attend after-school programs such as Scouts or Boys & Girls Clubs, or local Parks and Recreation activities. Many children are active members of faith communities. They go to services with their families or participate in special children's programs through their church or temple. Sports leagues, volunteer programs and special events hosted by community groups all involve children.

Children also spend more time with other families as they grow older. They may visit a friend's home after school, have dinner with a neighbor, spend an evening with a baby-sitter or stay overnight with a classmate.

Every one of these settings also addresses whole-person sexuality in some way. When they join a sports league, do children feel proud of the things their bodies can do, or are they humiliated because they have limited skill? Do they feel unique and special when they talk with the baby-sitter, or do they sense that this is someone who's just doing a job and doesn't really care about them? Do they feel exploited by people with more power, or guided and protected?

School

School, of course, has a tremendous influence on children's lives. It particularly affects their sense of pride, competence and self-esteem. Lessons in school can help children identify people they can go to for help, answers to their questions, or attention and reassurance. Strong school communities, based on principles of participation and respect, can give children a powerful sense of uniqueness and belonging.

School is one of the most effective places for children to have positive experiences that will help them develop in healthy and productive ways. Helping children develop a respectful, age-appropriate and well-boundaried sense of themselves is essential to healthy sexual development.

Hazardous Messages About Sexuality

Today's children are growing up in an era full of social problems related to sexuality. There is greater awareness of child sexual abuse. Teen pregnancy continues to be an issue. HIV makes the consequences of unsafe sexual behavior more serious than ever.

Children are dating at younger ages and having sex at younger ages. Even very young children's language is increasingly sexualized. Sex jokes are more common and sophisticated than they used to be.

In light of these sobering realities, many school and community programs have focused on "disaster prevention" in their sexuality education efforts. They design programs to help children avoid specific sexuality-related problems, but do not present these issues in a larger framework of healthy sexuality. Many states mandate HIV education, but some do it without providing sexuality education as well. Many primary classrooms offer child sex abuse prevention without placing such information in the context of positive and healthy standards for personal and family health.

This learning environment is potentially hazardous for children! What messages will children hear about sex if the only things they are told in formal settings is that some adults force children to have sex, and that sex can lead to AIDS and kill you? Many sexuality educators worry that with experiences like these today's young generation will grow up to be anxiety-ridden, sexually dysfunctional adults. When education about sexuality is consistently placed in a negative context, children may ignore prevention and health messages altogether.

Children come to school with pre-formed attitudes, both positive and negative, about sexuality. Even when parents strive to raise their children in nonsexist ways and present sexuality as a normal topic of conversation, children develop misconceptions and potentially harmful opinions.

From influences that often go well beyond parental instruction or modeling, some children learn early that:

- ♦ Sex is a taboo topic.
- ♦ The human body is shameful.
- ♦ The genitals are “nasty.”
- ♦ Roles for boys and girls are rigidly determined.

These messages cause pain and suffering for children in the here and now, as well as for the adults they will become in the future.

Starting Early to Promote Positive Attitudes

Societal values about sexuality influence children’s attitudes about themselves. They affect how comfortable children are with their bodies, how they think they should behave as boys or girls, how they feel about physical affection and whether they see themselves as attractive.

Societal biases also influence how children view and treat others. The National Association for the Education of Young Children reports that children as young as age 3 “exhibit ‘pre-prejudice’ toward others on the basis of gender or race or being differently abled.” By age 5, some children use racial reasons for refusing to interact with children different from themselves. At increasingly young ages, children become masters at name calling, with “gay” and “fag” leading the list of universal put-downs.

Teachers can consciously plan the messages they pass on to young children. Certain kinds of messages can help students develop healthier attitudes about themselves, their peers, their sexuality, and the important and unique contributions they have to make to their community.

Such messages might include:

- ◆ **I am special.** Help students understand themselves and others in a whole-person way. Use classroom activities that give them a chance to talk about who they are, what makes them unique, what they like about themselves, how they are different from others. This provides a strong, healthy foundation for understanding and respecting the unique feelings they and their friends will have about sexuality as they grow older.
- ◆ **I can figure out what I want.** When children have a chance to solve problems and make choices, they learn to identify what they want for themselves. They can also understand that other people might want different things and find ways to respect these differences. First graders might express this by negotiating a class treat (apples? oranges? carrot sticks?). These skills can also help a child identify that something is wrong in a sexually exploitive interaction with an older child or adult.
- ◆ **All people, including children, can have sexual feelings, and this is normal.** Many children have sexual feelings. For some children, these feelings may be quite strong. Many children masturbate. Children who believe these feelings or actions are bad, unhealthy or sinful may carry a great burden of secrecy and shame. When normal feelings are repressed or denied, they may emerge in less healthy ways—troubled self-esteem, anxiety or fear of discovery.
- ◆ **Sexual intercourse is an adult activity, and is not healthy for children.** Children need to hear, loud and clear, that it is not healthy or appropriate for kids to participate in adult sexuality. Hearing this message in counterpoint to the highly sexualized content of the media can be a great relief to many children.
- ◆ **Some children are curious about sex, others are not. Both are normal.** Sex is like other subjects. Some children are interested in whales and others are not. Some like to know about cars, some don't. Curiosity about sex is perfectly normal. So is a disinterest in it.

- ◆ **Parents are always a good place to start when children have questions about sex.** Elementary school teachers will often want to refer children's questions about sexuality back to parents. Most parents want to be available for their children's questions (though they often don't quite know how to get the conversations going). Schools can endorse the strength and importance of the family by recognizing and validating parents' role in their children's sexuality education.
- ◆ **No one should ever be pushed to do something that doesn't feel right.** Many children have participated in school programs that teach them that something is wrong when an adult or child wants to touch children in sexual ways. A broader message that can be very empowering for children is that they can and should seek help whenever anyone presses them to do something that doesn't feel right. The words "get help for uncomfortable feelings" are often used when teaching children about these issues.

Current Trends

Recent years have seen some encouraging new trends in adolescent sexuality. Fewer teens are having sex, and more of those who do are using more reliable forms of birth control. As a result, rates of teen pregnancy are beginning to fall.

There are, however, occasional reports of very early sexual activity. In some focused neighborhood surveys, children as young as age 10 or 12 are reporting sexual activity. What do these figures mean?

There are several possibilities:

- ◆ Some preteens may be having consensual sexual activity, including intercourse.
- ◆ Children completing self-report surveys may be confused about what terms mean. They may believe fondling or sex play are forms of intercourse, or consider kissing a form of sexual activity.
- ◆ Preteens and early adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse may report this as sexual activity.

Regardless of the source of such trends, educators' responses should be the same:

- ◆ Give children a strong grounding in self-esteem.
- ◆ Help them get accurate information about sex when they want it.
- ◆ Provide positive messages about the body and human sexuality.
- ◆ Teach children skills they can use to protect themselves from exploitation.
- ◆ Offer children guidance in developing their sexual sense of themselves in an age-appropriate manner.
- ◆ Intervene appropriately in instances of known or suspected sexual abuse.

How Schools Can Help

Schools that implement a comprehensive health education curriculum are taking a giant step in the right direction for sexuality education. Good comprehensive curricula address facts, feelings, attitudes, skills and behaviors. They help children think about their roles as individuals, as members of families, and as members of their class and school community.

Curricula that take this approach provide many opportunities to support healthy development. Children can learn to be better friends, better students and more responsible members of their community. The qualities that encourage healthy, whole-person sexuality fit right in.

Schools and districts can also take steps that give teachers the support they need to be effective sexuality educators. **Some suggestions:**

- ◆ **Provide clear guidelines** for teachers about what is and is not acceptable in classroom discussions about sexuality.

- ♦ **Offer inservice trainings** for teachers on teaching health topics, including how to answer students' questions about sexuality.
- ♦ **Provide clear policies** about:
 - Steps to take in instances of sexual harassment among students.
 - Dealing with sexist or homophobic actions or statements among students or staff.
- ♦ **Establish and support values of mutual respect** for differences; sponsor special schoolwide programs on diversity.

Celebrating the Whole Person!

Your students are at an age where they naturally celebrate the delight of the physical body. They are fascinated by similarities and differences. They're intensely sensitive to pleasure and pain. They want very much to belong to a community, and they love the opportunity to be a responsible member of a group. These are all qualities that make them perfect candidates for learning about whole-person sexuality.

2 How Children Learn About Sexuality

Most developmental approaches to sexuality talk about the stages children go through in understanding human reproduction. But reproduction, as important as it is, is only one part of human sexuality. Children today are growing up in a media environment that is highly sexualized, and they have been given a great deal of sexual information at young ages. What do they make of this information? How do they relate the feelings and sensations in their own bodies to what they see and hear on TV and in movies and music videos? What do *they* think sexuality is?

There is no good research data on these questions, and perhaps there never will be. It would be difficult to design a study that could ask children these questions in an appropriate way. The best understanding of children's view of sexuality will come from other kinds of information, such as:

- ◆ Children's sense of their physical bodies
- ◆ The ways children think about the world
- ◆ Children's understanding of families and relationships
- ◆ How children understand human reproduction
- ◆ Children's approach to differences in gender and roles
- ◆ Personal identity
- ◆ The kinds of questions children ask
- ◆ Social behaviors

As a teacher, you are observing these qualities all the time. So when you bring a more deliberate focus to children's developmental

capabilities, you can enrich your understanding of how your students think about sex. This can inform and strengthen your teaching about whole-person sexuality.

How Children Grow and Change

Birth to Age 2

Psychologically, infants come into the world completely dependent. They require their caretakers to provide for every need. When those needs are met consistently, babies learn to trust. Babies also learn how to be loved when they are held, stroked, patted, kissed and caressed. Infancy is a very sensual period of life.

Children at this age may:

- ◆ Explore body parts, including genitals.
- ◆ Begin to develop an attitude (either positive or negative) toward their own bodies.
- ◆ Experience genital pleasure (from birth, boys have erections and girls lubricate vaginally).
- ◆ Be encouraged by family to develop a male or female identity.
- ◆ Learn expected behaviors for boys and girls.

Ages 3 and 4

After the second year of life, children are much more independent. They are talkative and curious about everything, including their bodies and the bodies of others. It is common to see 3 year olds peeking under one another's clothing, undressing their dolls, and checking out the "bottoms" of pets and stuffed animals.

By this age, boys know they have a penis, which they handle to urinate. They have a name for this organ. They often have a chance to see the penises of other boys or men.

Girls are rarely taught about the analogous part of their bodies, the clitoris. They can't see their own vulvas without making a conscious effort. Some girls may discover that the clitoris is a source of intense physical sensation, but most don't find out a name for this organ until well beyond the childhood years.

Children at this age may:

- ◆ Become aware of and curious about gender and body differences.
- ◆ Masturbate unless taught not to.
- ◆ Play doctor or explore other forms of sex play with friends and siblings.
- ◆ Establish a firm internal belief that they are either male or female.
- ◆ Have fun with bathroom humor.
- ◆ Mimic adult sexual behavior.
- ◆ Begin to repeat curse words.
- ◆ Be curious about their own origins: "Where did I come from?"

Ages 5 to 8

Children in this age group have moved into the world beyond home and have begun to find their place in it. They realize they are starting to be judged on their own rather than their family's merits. They begin to reorganize the way they see themselves and adapt to new social situations. Children bring varying levels of knowledge and social skills to this period of life, depending on their family and preschool experiences.

Children at this age may:

- ◆ Continue sex play and masturbation.
- ◆ Be very curious about pregnancy and birth.
- ◆ Have strong same-sex friendships. Girls tend to form close intimate friendships with one or two other girls. Boys usually play

in larger groups, and their play is rougher and more oriented around activities.

- ◆ Show strong interest in stereotypical male/female roles, regardless of parents' approach to child rearing.
- ◆ Have a basic sexual orientation.
- ◆ Have a new awareness of authority figures. Teachers may be seen as knowing more than parents.
- ◆ Compare their own situations with those of peers and complain about lack of fairness.
- ◆ Begin to conform with peer group style of dress and speech. At this age boys experience more pressure than girls to adhere to sex-role expectations in areas such as choice of toys, hobbies, clothing and hair styles.
- ◆ Engage in name calling and teasing.

Ages 9 and 10

For many children, especially girls, fourth grade marks the onset of puberty. At this age, children are intensely curious, constantly teasing and interested in everything. They approach sexuality information in a direct and scientific manner. However, since girls tend to mature faster than boys, they often seem to feel more nervous and act more secretively during discussions about puberty, probably because the topic is closer to home for them than it is for boys.

Most children are very interested in music, clothes and all that it takes to be "cool." Some even have a boyfriend or girlfriend whom they see at school and talk to on the phone.

Children at this age may:

- ◆ Enter puberty, especially girls. Early pubertal development is often perceived positively by boys, but negatively by girls.
- ◆ Become more modest and desire privacy.

- ◆ Experience emotional ups and downs.
- ◆ Develop romantic crushes on friends, older teens, music and TV idols, teachers and counselors.
- ◆ Continue to attach importance to same-sex friends.
- ◆ Feel awkward and wonder, “Am I normal?”
- ◆ Masturbate to a deeper, more adult-style orgasm.
- ◆ Be strongly influenced by peer group, although parents continue to be the major source of values.
- ◆ Continue to learn about society’s expectations of appropriate behavior for boys and girls. Girls may experience increased pressure to conform to stereotyped sex roles—for example, avoiding academic achievement and preferring to base their popularity on appearance, personality or possessions.
- ◆ Begin to explore the mysteries of the adult world by using sexual language and enjoying romantic and sexual fantasies.
- ◆ Face decisions about sex and drugs.

Earlier Puberty

Girls are entering puberty at earlier ages than they were a generation ago. Today it is not unusual for girls to begin developing breasts and pubic hair by age 8. Some start menstruating as early as age 8 or 9. At one time, these children might have been referred to a physician for evaluation of “precocious puberty.” Today these signs are within normal developmental ranges.

If girls in your school are maturing early, lessons about the changes bodies go through during puberty may be appropriate as early as third and fourth grade. It’s important for teachers to remember that girls going through these changes may also experience the emotional ups and downs typical of puberty.

Earlier puberty does not seem to be occurring with boys.

How and What Children Think About Reproduction

Note: The stages of understanding outlined in this section are general. Some children will reach a stage sooner than peers, some later. A delay or advance of a year or two in a child's understanding of these concepts is not necessarily a sign of a problem.

Birth to Age 2

For about the first 18 months, a child perceives the world very literally. Infants can only digest what they can see, hear or touch at a given moment. They're learning to pay attention to the information that comes in through each of their senses.

In her classic book *The Magic Years* (1996), Selma Fraiberg refers to the concept of the "vanishing object." When Daddy displays a toy to his 6 month old and then hides the toy behind his back, the baby thinks the toy is gone. If the baby can't see it, it's not there. Babies perceive everything happening around them to be the result of their own actions. If they pull a toy, it moves. If they close their eyes, the world goes blank—like magic.

Ages 3 and 4

Children at this age are still concrete thinkers but they are making interesting new discoveries. They are realizing that there is a world outside themselves. They might begin to engage in symbolic play, such as pretending to call Auntie, who lives in a different house. But children this age still have difficulty understanding ideas that are not a part of their direct experience. In trying to make sense of things such as sex and birth, 3 and 4 year olds are likely to create theories that relate to what they themselves have seen, heard or felt.

For example, when seeing a pregnant woman (with a "fat stomach"), the child guesses that the woman has eaten something to make her stomach fat, or that the baby existed somewhere else, then got magically placed inside the mother's body. When children

are told about reproduction, they don't always believe or accept the information because it just doesn't make sense to them in the context of their own experience.

Anne Bernstein conducted some classic research with children to find out how they understood information about reproduction and birth at different ages. In her book *The Flight of the Stork* (1994), Bernstein labels children in this age group “geographers” because their theories focus on where the baby has come from (the store, Mom’s tummy or the hospital). Geographers believe the baby has always existed and for some reason has now come to live in their family.

Some 4 year olds may have reached the next level of understanding, in which the child guesses that babies are manufactured by people in much the same way as cars are produced in a factory. “Manufacturers” create stories to explain how the baby was made, e.g., the mother eats something that grows inside her tummy. Understanding that children think this way makes it clear that using language such as “The father plants his seed in the mother” only further confirms the child’s mythical thinking.

Mythical thinking about sexuality and reproduction is developmentally appropriate and not harmful. However, the goal of sexuality education is to help children move beyond the myths, not reinforce them. Children often persist in holding on to their own theories, even in the face of new factual information. This is also normal. But offering them clear and accurate information invites them to move on to the next conceptual stage as soon as they are ready to do so.

Ages 5 to 8

This is a time of enormous cognitive growth as a child slowly moves toward abstract thought. By age 6 or 7, most children are beginning to understand generalizations that go beyond their concrete experiences.

These children are learning not to be fooled by physical appear-

ances. They can see, for example, that $2+5=7$ is the same as $7=5+2$, even if the equations look different. They are active learners, concerned with how things work and are made. Their ideas are starting to be strongly influenced not only by what they see and hear, but by what they read.

Bernstein calls children at this stage “in between,” a transitional period in a child’s understanding of reproduction. Children in this age group may be able to recite the basic facts about reproduction, but they don’t quite grasp the full story. They may know that the mother’s egg meets with the father’s sperm, but think the egg is large and has a shell. They may know it takes a man and a woman to make a baby, but think the man and woman have to be married for reproduction to occur.

Ages 9 and 10

Children at this age are very open to new information. This is why many family life educators love working with this age group. However, even as children are taking in volumes of information, they aren’t yet thinking very deeply about the new ideas. Teachers can help by allowing time for reflection after each new experience or learning activity.

Bernstein calls these literal-minded thinkers “reporters.” Teachers can challenge the concrete style of reporters by asking open-ended questions: “What would you do if...?” and “What would happen if...?” In fact, children this age ask many of their own questions this way: “What happens if a girl and boy our age have sex?” or “What would happen if a lady was having 3 babies, was in an airplane crash and her stomach got hurt?”

Bernstein labels children in the next stage of understanding “theoreticians.” Theoreticians can consider past, present and future, and understand cause and effect. It’s clear to them that sexual intercourse is the vehicle for bringing together the sperm and the egg. But these young scientists aren’t sure why it’s necessary for two cells to unite. They may think the fetus already exists in either the

sperm or the egg, and the connection between the two cells is only needed to promote the growth of the preexisting fetus.

It isn't until around age 12 that most children can really put the story of reproduction together completely.

How Children Develop Sexual Identity

Another area of development has to do with children's growing awareness of themselves as sexual persons—male or female—who are attracted to other people—male or female. **There are four issues to consider:**

- **Biosexual identity** refers to a person's physiology. Each child comes into the world with genitals, reproductive organs, genes and hormones that are biologically determined and not influenced by the culture.
- **Core gender identity** refers to a person's internal sense of being either male or female. Up until around 18 months of age, children don't know for sure whether they're boys or girls. They learn their gender by the way they're labeled by others and by their own observations. For example, girls see that they have bodies like their mothers, aunts or sisters. "I am like mother. Mother is a female. So I must be female."

Somewhere between 18 months and 3 years of age, children develop a strong internal conviction that they're either male or female. Usually their conviction matches their physical package, but sometimes it doesn't and confusion, isolation and discomfort can follow.

- **Gender-role identity** refers to adopting specific behaviors that the culture says are appropriate for boys or girls. A child's gender role identity is influenced by many factors, including personality, education, family and culture.

Strong cultural messages about how boys or girls should behave begin to influence children from the time they're born. By the

time they start school, boys and girls will show distinct differences in the clothes they wear and the toys they choose. They may use different language in some settings, with boys being more likely to use denigrating slang about sexual or other physical processes. These differences will continue to intensify for most children as they grow.

- **Sexual orientation** is a term used to describe a person's potential for romantic or sexual attraction to others. Some people are oriented toward members of the same sex, some toward the other sex, and some toward both sexes.

Current medical research indicates that sexual orientation is strongly influenced by biological processes. The term “sexual preference” is inaccurate because sexual orientation is really a state of being rather than a choice—people do not choose to be either heterosexual or homosexual.

There is evidence that variety in sexual orientation has been present in virtually all human cultures across time. While some people may think of same-sex orientation as a moral issue, it appears to be a constant presence in human history, and well within the norms of human sexual behavior.

Watch Out for Concrete Thinking

We live in an information-rich culture. Even very young children, after family discussions, news reports and classroom lessons, may be able to discuss and describe intercourse, condoms, oral sex and sexually transmitted disease. However, while children can sometimes describe a sexual behavior in terms that are clear to adults, the process itself may continue to hold confusion for the child.

Bernstein gives wonderful examples of this. Many of the children in her study explain that men and women join together to form a baby and that men put penises into vaginas to make this happen. These sound like kids with a good grounding in the facts of sexuality and reproduction. But their range of further explanations

about the process is fascinating—the sperm has a chemistry, like a fertilizer, that gets the egg to grow; the sperm, which is like a tadpole, bites a hole in the vagina so it can swim into the mother’s body; the baby is in the sperm but needs a safe place to grow, so it goes into the egg in the mother.

This is why it is important to watch for concrete thinking in children’s answers. The best way to check the thoroughness of their comprehension is to have them explain their understanding in more detail. Ask open-ended questions that help them expand on the facts and opinions they express.

Supporting Appropriate Development

Your work as a teacher will be enhanced by your recognition that your students are moving through different stages at different paces. Every individual child has a unique experience in his or her development of sexual understanding. As with all developmental issues, this one cannot be separated from the context of personal experience.

It is strongly influenced by children’s environment (do they see lots of music videos? view many R-rated movies? have adults who are available to answer their questions about sexuality?). It is dependent on their personal physiology (at what age do they reach puberty? what is the nature of their sexual feelings before puberty?). It is affected by their family (do they feel loved, nurtured, uniquely valued?) and peer group (are values of respect and understanding established?).

Steps that will help all your students move at an appropriate pace and in a reasonable manner include:

- ◆ **Help students move forward conceptually**, from one stage to the next, without forcing the issue. Sometimes kids will leap up to that next stage; often they will not. It’s important to let children find their own pace and allow them to move when they’re ready.

Example: Offer factual information about reproduction if the question comes up, but let children hold on to earlier-stage explanations if they wish (e.g., babies grow from a seed packet).

- ♦ **Focus on principles that meet your school's guidelines.** Find opportunities to do the kind of teaching about whole-person sexuality that's acceptable in your school and community. These efforts help strengthen self-esteem and children's sense of belonging to the community.

Examples: Help students notice and feel good about their unique bodies. Teach students to respect differences. Give them a chance to enjoy a wide range of physical sensations, such as eating, running, dancing and staying fit. Use teachable moments to emphasize that while many people, including children, may have sexual feelings, sexual activities such as intercourse are adult behaviors and are not healthy for children.

- ♦ **Help children learn more about touch.** When children learn about sexual abuse or HIV, they sometimes become anxious about activities such as sleeping with a sibling, hugging or kissing a parent, or being held or rocked by an aunt or uncle. They will benefit from opportunities to identify acceptable and enjoyable types of physical touching.

Tolerance

In striving to create an environment that nurtures healthy, whole-person sexuality, values of tolerance and acceptance are important. Children have the capacity to be very hard on peers who challenge the norms in any way. They also have a great interest in belonging to an accepting and nurturing community.

Whenever possible, stress the remarkable impact each individual child has on creating the kind of community all want to belong to. This frame of mind can do much to ease the suffering children who are different often experience.

Examples: Use lessons that help children differentiate between acceptable and positive physical touching and the kinds of touching that do not feel OK. Cultivate physical nurturance within families.

- ♦ **Teach about different kinds of privacy.** Discussions and questions about sexuality can often be handled more easily for children when the concept of privacy is clearly established.

Examples: Teach students that it's not appropriate to go through one another's desks, or to continue asking questions about something when someone has declined to answer. Have them keep journals in class and allow them to choose what parts they share with classmates. Have them talk about the ways they respect other people's privacy at home or in school.

It's Enlightening!

Learning about sexuality, like learning about life, is an ongoing process. Watching children move through the various stages of understanding can be an enlightening and rewarding process. As a teacher, you have an opportunity to support your students as they grow into new levels of understanding and interest. Keep your perspective positive, your understanding open and your creativity moving, and both you and your students will have wonderful experiences learning about whole-person sexuality.

3 Answering Children's Questions

Children have lots of questions about everything in the world around them. Sex is one of those things. Children's curiosity is honest and healthy. In an ideal world, questions about sexuality would be heard, recognized and responded to clearly, compassionately and appropriately.

In the real world, things may be a little different. While giving children correct answers to their questions about *anything*, including sexuality, is the healthiest, most professional and most reasonable course of action for an educator, many teachers are specifically restricted by school or district policy from discussing sexual issues with their students. Others hesitate to do so for fear of creating controversy.

Yet teachers who face such restrictions can come up with some reasonable alternatives. They can support their students' healthy development without violating school policies. This is possible because healthy sexuality has a foundation that has very little to do with information about sex. In the early elementary grades, teachers can help set that foundation by helping students develop mentally, physically and socially in healthy ways.

This chapter gives you some ideas about how to offer answers to children's questions. It also describes some general issues that commonly emerge when adults talk to children about sexuality. If a specific suggestion seems too explicit for your setting, don't worry! There are lots of options for responding to children in positive and healthy ways.

Taking Off Adult Glasses

One of the biggest challenges adults face in sexuality education is getting into the mindset of children. Adults' perception of sexuality is completely different from that of children because adults have had many more years to internalize societal and cultural attitudes. In fact, children might actually teach their teachers something about attitudes toward sex because of their fresh perspective.

The following guidelines can help you respond to children in ways that make sense to them:

- ◆ **Distinguish between adult sexuality and childhood sexuality.** Interpret children's behavior and questions within the framework of their developmental stage. For example, a 5 year old who lies on top of another child is not trying to have sexual intercourse in the way we understand it. A child this young is mimicking some adult behavior, perhaps seen at home or on TV.
- ◆ **Gear information to the child's level of development.** Young children process information about sex and reproduction in predictable but unsophisticated ways. They're trying to make sense of the world based on what they've seen, touched, heard and felt. Because they are concrete thinkers, children are most concerned with the where, what and how of a circumstance. Where does the baby come from? What's it like for a baby inside the uterus? How is the baby made?

Children create theories to answer these questions. They often find their own ideas preferable to adults' correct but unbelievable explanations. When you find out more about their current views, you can help them step up to a more sophisticated level of comprehension.
- ◆ **Don't worry too much.** A number of common concerns arise when adults began to talk about sexuality with children. Can you give a child too much information? Will knowing the names of sexual parts of the body lead to a loss of innocence? Will

knowing about sexual intercourse make a child want to try it? Will this knowledge overwhelm the child?

The answers to these questions aren't simple, but they are reassuring. The biggest danger in giving children too much information is that they will be bored. Knowing correct names for body parts will help children communicate better, and may help some children seek help for health problems more quickly. Most children hearing about sexual intercourse are surprised by the concept and have no interest in having anything to do with it.

Explicit sexual messages that are stressful for children usually come not from conversations at school or home, but from watching TV, movies and music videos. Today's environment of sexual learning is provocative, increasing children's need for guidance and direction from the responsible adults in their lives. This is one of the big reasons sexuality education in schools is so important.

- ◆ **Less can be better than more.** When dealing with very young children, it is sometimes best to begin with the simplest explanation (the "less answer") and move on to a more complicated explanation if they continue to be interested. Because it's such a challenge to get out of an adult mindset, teachers may fall into the trap of giving complicated answers to simple questions.
- ◆ **Approach sexuality issues proactively rather than reactively.** Children need guidance from adults to prepare them for each stage of psychological, social and sexual development. The focus of your interactions with children should be on their positive development as sexual human beings, not simply on helping them avoid sexual abuse or teen pregnancy. A focus on "disaster prevention" can sidetrack teachers and parents from the true goal of sexuality education, which is to give children the information, attitudes and skills they need to become sexually healthy and responsible adults.

Learning About Differences

Through your words and actions, you can give the message that individual differences in human beings exist, are positive and are OK to talk about. Sometimes young children are made to feel they've said something wrong if they comment on another child's skin color, hair type or physical ability. These topics then become as taboo as sexuality.

You can help children learn to accept and appreciate the kinds of

Create a Rich Learning Environment

You can help children learn about healthy sexuality by having materials in the classroom that they can explore on their own. These materials help children challenge their own thinking and teach them that it is all right to have questions.

Some things you might include:

- Anatomically correct dolls
- Puppets or dolls that can fill the roles of various family members (mothers, fathers, babies, older kids, grandparents, uncles and aunts)
- Life-size infant dolls, along with diapers, blankets, bottles and rattles
- Storybooks on feeling good about the body or challenging gender roles
- Storybooks about different family configurations (children living with a grandparent, in extended families, with a single parent, with two same-sex parents, with a mother and father)
- Posters of diverse leaders, including women and men, people of different ethnicities, people of different physical abilities, people of different sexual orientations
- Picture books about the human body, babies and reproduction
- Age-appropriate books about sexuality

differences they see and hear. Molly's skin is very light, and Kaseef's is very dark. Miyoko, who grew up speaking Japanese, pronounces words differently from LeAnne, who grew up right in this town.

These kinds of differences are interesting to children. You can guide your students in learning constructive ways to notice and respond to differences. Instead of hushing a child and saying skin color doesn't matter, an adult might say, "We all have a special chemical in our skin that determines how dark our skin will be. If you have a little of the chemical, your skin is light, like Molly's. If you have a lot, your skin is dark, like Kaseef's."

Creating the kind of environment where truly interesting differences can be discussed in a respectful and informative way helps children develop healthy whole-person sexuality. These are skills that can help a child later as a teen or adult to be more tolerant of people of different sexual orientations and interests, or to talk more clearly and comfortably with a sexual partner about differences of desire. The ability to explore differences and new ideas with open eyes and genuine curiosity is a great attribute in almost any endeavor, including being a sexually healthy person.

General Guidelines to Keep in Mind

There are several general approaches you probably already use in your teaching. **These are good principles to follow any time you work with children, and are particularly important when talking with children about sexuality:**

- ◆ **Be honest.** Be aware of what you do and don't know. Children are exposed to enough misinformation without the adults in their lives adding to the confusion. If you don't know the answer to a question, say that you don't but that you'll find out.

Likewise, if a question makes you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, say so. It's fine to say, "I didn't expect you to ask that

question and I feel a little embarrassed. But I'm glad you asked and I'll try to answer it." This lets the child know that you feel it's important to talk about sexuality even if the question causes some discomfort.

If you try to pretend you're comfortable when you're not, children will usually see through your act. Either they'll have fun making you uncomfortable or they'll shy away from putting you in that situation in the future.

- ♦ **Answer questions in age-appropriate language.** Use simple, concrete answers and words children can understand. Avoid technical language or jargon. Define new terms and use illustrations or colloquial terms that children already know.

For example, if you're talking about the penis, you might say, "The penis is the part of a boy's body between his legs that he uses to urinate, or pee. Some people call the penis the 'pee pee,' 'privates,' or some other name. The name we'll use here at school is *penis*."

- ♦ **Find out more about a child's question.** Ask, "What do you think about that?" "How do *you* think it happens?" or "What have you heard about this?" Make sure your tone sounds accepting and not disapproving. This technique can give you a clearer idea of the child's question. It also gives you a few extra minutes to figure out what you want to say.
- ♦ **Check out the child's understanding.** After you've answered a question, you might say, "Let's see if I explained that well." Then have the child tell you what he or she understood.

What About Personal Questions?

Some personal questions are harmless: Are you married? Do you have a baby? Others are a little more revealing: Did it hurt when you had your baby? Are you gay?

Teachers will make individual decisions about answering questions like these. But it's best if teachers not discuss their personal sexual experiences with students.

Very personal questions are not uncommon, and it's perfectly reasonable for children to ask these things. Even third or fourth graders might ask: How old were you when you first had sex? Do you use condoms? How often do you have sex? or How long do you do it for?

Some simple reframing techniques can help you respect your students' interest and curiosity, model ways people can maintain privacy, and allow you to stay firmly and appropriately within the boundaries of your role. Here's an example:

"What I did or didn't do is personal for me, but we can talk in general. Do you want to know how old most people are when they have sex the first time? There's no set answer here, but it's definitely a good idea to wait until you are an adult to make your own decisions." Then go on to talk about the different choices people make rather than your own personal experiences.

Make Abstract Ideas Concrete

Making abstract ideas concrete is a great idea, but how do you do it? Although each child and each classroom of students is different, the following techniques are useful:

- **Ask questions.** "What have you heard?" "How do you suppose that happens?" "Why do you think people would do this?"
- **Use pictures and diagrams.** For elementary school children, use diagrams that appear within an outline of the whole body. These are much easier to understand than diagrams that show only one part of the body.
- **Use simple language.** Be sure the meanings of new words are clear.
- **Link new information** to things students have already learned.

A Question of Values

When children ask what's right or wrong in a given situation, they're asking value-laden questions. These are ideal discussions for children and parents to have, and provide a wonderful opportunity for parents to share their own values with their children.

It's different for teachers because they're educating other people's children. Teachers are expected not to impose their personal values in the classroom. Sometimes people talk about providing sex education in a "value neutral" format.

But most school and community programs do identify a set of underlying values on which sexuality education is based. It would be nearly impossible to teach about sexuality, or anything else, without some underlying values informing the teaching.

The responsibility is to come up with values that resonate broadly within the school and community—values parents and teachers can embrace with equal enthusiasm. While there is plenty of controversy in the realm of sexuality education, there are also many values that are widely shared.

Here are some examples of values supported in a range of sexuality education programs around the country:

- ◆ **Children should have access** to age-appropriate information about sexuality.
- ◆ **Parents are the primary sexuality educators** of their children. Parents, rather than teachers, have the responsibility of transmitting specific values related to sexual behavior. Schools and community agencies should function as partners with parents in providing sexuality education.
- ◆ **The worth and dignity of all individuals** should be recognized. All individuals should be treated with respect, regardless of their gender, race, age, religion, culture or sexual orientation.
- ◆ **Sexuality is a natural, positive aspect** of the human personality.

- ◆ **It is wrong to exploit** or take advantage of others.
- ◆ **The human body**, as well as all of the associated bodily functions, is natural and good.
- ◆ **Sexual intercourse** and other adult sexual behaviors are not appropriate for children.
- ◆ **It's best for adolescents to postpone parenthood** until they've completed high school and started a career. They can do this by abstaining from sexual intercourse or by using an effective method of contraception.

These underlying values can guide teachers in answering questions in the classroom. They can help you evaluate how much can be said and what an appropriate focus or direction for the answer might be. For example, if a child asks, "What happens when a 20-year-old man has sex with a 9-year-old girl?" several of these values allow a teacher to take a strong stand. Because it is wrong for someone to exploit others, you could say that it's definitely wrong for any adult to have sex with a 9 year old, and that you hope that if this is happening the girl will talk to a trusted adult and get help to stop it.

If you don't know the values that guide your sexuality education program, consult your principal. You may have to advocate for the development of a set.

Steps for Answering Questions

Here are some simple steps you can take to answer children's questions about sexuality. This is a model that engages children at an appropriate developmental level and validates their curiosity. It lets children know that you are a good source for information and that you welcome their questions. And it gives you the freedom to do all of this while abiding by the policies and guidelines of your school.

Steps in Answering Questions

1. Hear the question.
2. Choose the teaching.
3. Build a bridge.
4. I can tell you...

Step 1: Hear the Question

Children's questions about sexuality are sometimes specifically stated: How do babies get out of the mommy? Why do grownups want to have sex anyway? But many of their questions are more subtly expressed. You can hear unspoken questions in children's comments and behaviors. Children try out ideas and check information with their classmates. School is a setting where they are likely to practice new ideas or test limits on old ones.

Here are some playground examples. Have you seen or heard things like this? Ricky exclaims, "That guy Harry is such a sissy!" Mario throws the ball directly at Ariana's face to make her flinch. Lyle grabs his crotch and talks loudly about all the "babes" in the lunch line. Susanna lifts up her skirt and flashes her panties at a group of boys. Esmerelda tells Bette that boys are stupid so she doesn't want Denzel in their reading group. Eric tells Nicholas that dads have to squirt some kind of fertilizer into women's vaginas to make a baby start growing.

You won't want to intervene every time you hear a child express some issue related to sexuality. But every one of these instances offers an opportunity to help children improve the accuracy of their information or bring more thought to the values expressed by their behaviors.

Step 2: Choose the Teaching

There are usually several directions you could go in answering children's questions. Certainly in any of the examples above, many

possibilities present themselves. Do you want to address a student's attitudes? provide more accurate information? give support to healthy and appropriate social norms? offer an opportunity to practice skills such as assertiveness, setting boundaries or getting help?

What do you think would be most helpful for the student? What would be most confirming? What would be most helpful within the school community? What standards and norms do you want your students to hold within their peer group?

Step 3: Build a Bridge

The next step is building a bridge between the student's question or behaviors and the teaching you wish to provide.

You lay the foundation of the bridge by asking the student to say a little more. Having students name the issues to the best of their ability helps you in 2 important ways:

- ◆ It gives you a good sense of their current understanding.
- ◆ It avoids the impression that you are "putting ideas in their heads," a prospect that can create distress among some parents or administrators.

You build the span of the bridge by putting the student's question into terms the two of you can discuss clearly and comfortably. Here's how this works using one of the earlier examples.

Imagine that Susanna is your student and you see her lift her skirt at the boys. You *hear a question* here about appropriate behavior among classmates. You *choose a teaching* about treating oneself and others with respect. You speak privately with Susanna and ask her what she was thinking when she did this. She says she was teasing them, and that she saw someone do this on a TV show. You've just *laid the foundation* of the bridge.

Then you *build the span*. You say, "What you're talking about, Susanna, is having fun with people and enjoying their attention." This is the bridge to your teaching about appropriate behavior and respect. You've put the motives for her behavior in a favorable light.

Now you can talk to her about why she likes teasing others, her favorite kinds of attention, and what she wants other people to think of her. Somewhere in here will almost certainly be some entree into appropriate things she can do to gain popularity and attention.

Step 4: I Can Tell You...

Susanna's example turns out to be a pretty straightforward one. You have something you want to tell her, which is that lifting her skirt is not an acceptable or appropriate way for her to get other people's attention. Because of the kind of conversation you are having, she will probably be able to come up with some other ideas of what would be more appropriate herself.

Building a bridge frames children's questions in a way that allows you to respond with integrity and respect. In almost any situation you can think of, there will be some kind of bridge to a teaching or answer you can offer.

Sometimes, however, there will be answers you are unable to give. You may not know the answer. You may not be able to give the answer because of your school's guidelines about sexuality education. It's important to acknowledge this with children as well.

Perhaps a child has raised a question about condoms, and you teach at a school where the use of this term is forbidden. Your bridge might be something like, "Well, Connor, you're asking a question about ways adults can take care of themselves when they have sex. This is a good question. The school has asked us not to talk to students about these things because they are very personal. But your parents would be good people to talk to about this. I hope you'll ask them."

This is an honest and direct way to deal with this situation. But there's one more step you can take, and that is to build a bridge to a topic you *can* discuss. Here's how that might work with Connor: "It's good to know adults can make smart choices and take care of themselves. People make choices about all kinds of things—what

they eat, whether they smoke, wearing safety belts. People learn these kinds of things when they're young. Kids who learn how to make smart choices at your age are going to be much healthier when they're teens and adults. I'm interested in some of the smart choices you're making about your life today. This is something we *can* talk about."

This isn't ideal, of course. Connor has asked a reasonable question about condoms, and it would be best if he could get a clear answer right in the moment. But it does leave Connor with the sense that it wasn't in any way wrong for him to ask the question. He sees your honest interest in him. He gains the benefits of your attention and concern. These are pretty good things for him to walk away with, even if you aren't able to give him a direct answer about condoms.

Key Concepts to Teach

There are a number of key concepts related to healthy whole-person sexuality. When you are laying the foundation and building the bridge, it may help to think about what concepts are raised by the child's question, and what some appropriate health messages related to this concept are.

Key Concepts

- Curiosity is good.
- The physical body is wonderful and fascinating.
- Children can get help with troublesome feelings.
- People make choices.
- Differences are enriching.
- Families change.
- Respect yourself and others.
- Think about the future.

Here are some good concepts to keep in mind. You may think of others that are important for your students.

- ♦ **Curiosity is good.** Most adults who have fulfilling and successful lives have found ways to hold on to some of the wonder and excitement children have naturally. It is important to welcome and confirm children's curiosity about all kinds of things, including sexuality.

Possible lessons: Praise and validate children's curiosity. Help them notice the rewards of curiosity. Help them notice the potential dangers, such as taking risks when they are curious about something (e.g., trying cigarettes, climbing up to the roof).

- ♦ **The physical body is wonderful and fascinating.** Healthy children experience pride and comfort in their bodies and find pleasure in physical sensation. Children have many questions about the physical processes of the body (growth, sex, reproduction, elimination, strength, sickness). They are discovering ways their bodies are unique, as well as ways they are similar to others.

Possible lessons: Growth and change are normal and ongoing. There are clear and acceptable terms for every body part and process. Every body is unique and wonderful.

- ♦ **Children can get help with troublesome feelings.** Children wonder about their own experiences. Is their growth and development normal? Are their thoughts and feelings normal? Is their family normal? Some children are hurt or exploited by peers, older children or adults. Children need to share troublesome feelings with an adult.

Possible lessons: Bodies are different, and many different paces of growth are normal. Friends, family and others can help you cope with troublesome feelings. There are ways to get help if someone is hurting you or someone else.

- ♦ **People make choices.** Children hear about other people's difficult situations and experience their own. Young children are still developing the ability to see that choices lead to conse-

quences. Sometimes it is useful for them to think about the kinds of choices people make and the outcomes, both good and troublesome, that may follow.

Possible lessons: Adults and children make choices every day that affect their lives right now. Choices they make today can also affect their lives in the future. Adults and children often make different kinds of choices. Sometimes a smart choice today can save a person much trouble, now or later on.

- ◆ **Differences are enriching.** Children are intrigued by differences: between adults and children, males and females, babies and school-age kids, animals and humans. They enjoy learning about different cultures and different family traditions and rules. Much of their sexual curiosity comes from this fascination with differences.

Possible lessons: Differences enrich people's lives. Some differences are obvious (height, skin color) and some are not (feelings, attitudes, interests). People have many physical similarities and a few differences. Adults and children often are interested in different things.

- ◆ **Families change.** As they grow, children are increasingly aware of ways families change. Within their own families, even at very young ages, they may have experienced shifts. New members arrive, and sometimes people leave. People are born. People die. Children may come into a family through birth or adoption. Sometimes family members or friends stay for a short or long time.

Possible lessons: Discuss reproduction, adoption, different family structures, taking care of babies. Normalize differences and changes.

- ◆ **Respect yourself and others.** A community that values respect is a community that can nurture healthy whole-person sexuality. Children can learn to show respect through their behaviors and attitudes. They can make choices that help their friends and peers feel better about themselves. In a respecting

environment, children can make choices to take care of their own bodies, feelings and values, and show care for others’.

Possible lessons: Children can take care of themselves physically and emotionally, and support others to do the same. It’s important to respect others’ boundaries, to listen, and to communicate clearly.

- ♦ **Think about the future.** Children live very much in the moment, but they are also interested in who they will be in the future. First graders can tell you what they want to be when they grow up, who they think they’ll marry, or how many children they will have. This interest in the future can provide a good support for making healthy choices now.

Possible lessons: Children can make smart choices that respect and take care of their physical bodies for the future. They can take steps to be emotionally healthy. They can try out different kinds of plans for the future, and have the freedom to change these plans.

Sample Questions and Answers

There are a zillion different questions children can raise about life, change, sexuality, bodies and growing up. The meaning of every question and the direction of every answer will be different, depending on the child, your relationship and the situation in which it is raised.

The examples here will be helpful models. Questions and answers are organized by age ranges in which the questions are most common, but any of these questions (and hundreds of others not included here) might come up at any age. Remember, in actual discussions with students you would ask them a lot of questions too as you plan your answers, so you can understand what information they already have.

Kindergarten

Where do babies come from?

Babies grow in a special place inside the mother's body. This place is warm and cozy and made just to hold the baby. This special place is called the uterus.

How does the baby get inside the mom?

The baby starts from a tiny little egg, which we call an ovum. *(Draw a dot with a pencil to show that the ovum is very small.)* This little ovum is already in the woman's body. But the woman needs help from a man to make a baby. The man has something special in his body called sperm. When the sperm joins the ovum, the baby starts to grow.

How does the sperm join the egg?

The sperm has to leave the man's body and get inside the woman's body. The sperm leaves the man's body through an opening at the end of his penis. The sperm gets into the woman's body through an opening between her legs called the vagina. So when the penis is put into the vagina, the sperm goes from the man's body into the woman's body, where it can meet the ovum.

Where does the baby poop when it's in the mommy?

Babies don't have to poop, or have a bowel movement, until after they're born. That's handy, because they don't have diapers when they're in the mom's uterus.

But babies do need to pee, or urinate. They can urinate right there in the uterus. This is OK because the mom's body keeps the uterus clean and fresh every day. It's kind of like the way your own body keeps your eyes clean.

Why don't girls stand up to pee?

You've noticed that boys stand up and girls sit down when they pee, or urinate. Boys stand up and urinate through an opening in their penis. Girls sit down because they urinate through an

opening between their legs. Standing for boys and sitting for girls are the easiest and neatest ways for both to urinate.

Why don't I have a penis? (*asked by a girl*)

Boys and girls have many body parts that are the same and some that are different. Boys have a penis. Girls don't. But girls have some special parts that boys don't have.

Girls have a vulva. That's the part of a girl's body that's between her legs. Girls also have a clitoris, which is a small part of the vulva. Like the penis in boys, the clitoris sometimes feels good when it is touched.

Grades 1 and 2

How does the baby get out?

When the baby is big enough, it comes out through the opening between the mother's legs. This opening is called the vagina. That's how most babies are born.

For children who are still curious, or know about Cesarean births, you can explain further: Some babies are born in a different way. The doctor makes a small opening in the mother's uterus from outside the body (*point to the abdomen*), and takes the baby out that way. Either way, the baby is born fine.

Does it hurt to have a baby?

Yes, it usually does. But a pregnant woman can learn ways to breathe that make having a baby less painful. She can have someone else around, such as the baby's father, to help make her comfortable. Some women also take medicine to help the pain. Most mothers say the joy of having a baby makes it easier to deal with the pain.

How does the baby eat when it's inside its mother?

The baby gets food when it's in the uterus, but not in the way that you and I eat food with our mouths. The baby is attached to its

mother's uterus by a tube called the umbilical cord. This tube takes blood into the baby's body. The blood is full of rich vitamins and minerals. It's like a special baby energy drink.

It's important for pregnant women to eat healthy food. This helps their bodies give healthy food to the baby through the umbilical cord.

What is sex?

A lot of people use the word *sex* to mean sexual intercourse. This is when a man puts his penis in a woman's vagina. But sex can be more than this. It can include a lot of different ways two adults might touch each other's bodies to show love or to get good feelings.

What is rape?

Remember when we talked about sex? When adults have sex they might kiss and touch each other's bodies. Sometime they have intercourse. The man's penis goes into the woman's vagina. Sex should only happen when both people want it to happen. Rape happens when one person forces another person to have sex. Rape is not OK. In fact, rape is against the law in our country.

What is semen?

Semen is a white fluid men's bodies make when they're having sex. Semen carries the sperm out of the man's body.

What is a condom?

A condom is something a man can put on his penis during sex. It looks a little bit like a balloon that hasn't been blown up. It can help both partners stay healthy.

Sometimes a person has a kind of disease that can be passed to someone else during sex. The germs that cause these diseases might live in a man's semen. The germs can also live inside a woman's vagina. A condom keeps people from passing these germs during sex.

Because it fits over the penis, a condom stops a man's semen and sperm from going into a woman's body. So it can also allow a man and woman to have sexual intercourse without making a baby.

Why don't boys get breasts?

Actually, boys do have breasts. But their breasts stay pretty flat. When girls become teenagers, their breasts get rounder and larger so they can feed a baby if they decide to have one later when they are adults. When boys become men, they won't be able to feed a baby from their breasts. But they can take care of a baby by feeding it from a bottle.

What happens when 2 people get stuck together?

You may have seen dogs mating that seem to get "stuck." That doesn't look comfortable at all, does it?

This doesn't happen with people. They can stop having sexual intercourse any time they want to.

Don't babies get grown in test tubes sometimes?

Not really. But sometimes babies get started in special ways.

Sometimes a man and a woman want to have a baby but can't get pregnant, so they might get help from a doctor. There are lots of things doctors can do to help.

One thing a doctor can do is to help the sperm and ovum join together. Instead of this happening inside the woman, it happens in a special kind of dish at the doctor's lab. The doctor makes sure the sperm and ovum are joined and that the baby is growing. Then the doctor puts the ovum back inside the woman's uterus.

This is a different way to get things started. But the baby will grow the same way other babies do and be just like everyone else once he or she is born.

Sometimes people call this a test-tube baby, but it's just a normal baby who had a special start.

Grade 3

Children in third grade are in a special place of sexual understanding. They have many of the concrete ideas of younger children, but they are beginning to learn about some of the more abstract qualities of life. Not everything is absolute. Things can be complex, especially human behavior.

Third graders might ask any of the questions younger children ask, as well as any of the questions fourth graders ask. Be sure to reflect questions with all students, but especially third graders, to check their current developmental stage in understanding sexuality.

Grade 4

What would you do if your mom and dad separated and your dad got remarried and the stepmother was mean to you?

Lots of children worry that they'll end up with a mean stepparent. You may have heard fairy tales about wicked stepmothers. That makes it easy to expect stepparents to be mean and nasty.

Most stepmothers and stepfathers aren't mean. But it can be hard to get used to having a new "parent" around. You might worry about how much that person will tell you what to do, or if she'll take all your dad's attention away from you. It's very important for kids to have someone to talk to when they're dealing with this kind of situation. Who are some of the adults you could talk to?

If a man's penis is in a woman's vagina and the man pees, what will happen?

You know that a man urinates through his penis. So it makes sense to wonder whether he might urinate during sexual intercourse. This can't happen. When a man is having intercourse, his body doesn't let him urinate.

Are tampons better than sanitary napkins?

I don't think either one is better than the other. Both tampons and sanitary napkins are good choices for girls and women. A girl on her period can swim comfortably if she's wearing a tampon, but not if she's wearing a sanitary napkin. That's the biggest difference. Girls can get advice from their parents about which is best for them to use.

How do two women have sex together?

A lot like the way a man and a woman do. They might kiss and hug and use their hands and mouths to touch each other's bodies. They might touch each other's vulvas. They find ways to be close that feel good. Because women don't have penises, two women don't have the kind of sexual intercourse we've talked about in class.

How do two men have sex together?

A lot like the way a man and a woman do. They might kiss and hug and use their hands and mouths to touch each other's bodies. They might touch each other's penises. They find ways to be close that feel good. Because men don't have vaginas, two men don't have the kind of sexual intercourse we've talked about in class.

How many minutes do you have to stay in sexual intercourse?

There's no set amount of time that people have to stay in sexual intercourse. It depends on the people and how they're feeling at the moment. Some people have intercourse for a minute or two; some for much longer.

A woman can get pregnant even if she doesn't have sex with a man, if she just uses his sperm, right?

Yes, this is possible. Sometimes a woman wants to have a baby but isn't involved with a man who could be the baby's father. Sometimes a man and woman want to have a baby but can't get pregnant.

In either of these cases, a woman might use something called donor insemination. This means she gets semen and puts it into her vagina herself, instead of having sexual intercourse.

This is a special way to get pregnant, but once a woman is pregnant the baby grows just like any other baby. When the baby is born, he or she is just like any other person.

Is it dangerous for boys to touch their own penises, or girls to touch their own vulvas?

No, not at all. Many children and adults enjoy touching themselves this way. Other people don't enjoy it. It's entirely up to each individual. The word for this kind of touching is *masturbation*.

Many people masturbate. But it's one of those things that people do in private.

Is it dangerous for children to have sex?

Some children are curious about sex, but most kids feel fine about waiting until they're much older to find out what sex is like. Most children's bodies have not grown and developed enough to have sexual intercourse.

It's *never* OK for an adult or older child to have sex with someone your age or to touch a child in sexual ways. When older people do this, they are taking advantage of the younger person. If you hear of something like this happening, I hope you'll tell me or some other adult so we can be sure it stops and that the child is OK.

Reassuring Communication

Remember, the answers you give children are important, but the emotional content of your communication is even more critical. This can take many forms. It might be choosing words that convey positive feelings, having a relaxed and open facial expression, taking quick steps to stop any form of discrimination in your classroom, or the way you accept children's honest feelings, concerns and questions.

Chapter 3

Children will hear the reassuring tone of your voice as you explain the value of each individual's unique experience. They'll respond to your willingness to discuss an issue even when you feel a little embarrassed. They'll appreciate your readiness to discuss the pleasure associated with sexual feelings and behavior as much as the possible negative consequences. Most important, they will set their own foundations for becoming sexually healthy adults when they sense your positive attitude toward whole-person sexuality.

4 **Shaping Peer Norms**

What do children do with confusing information about sexuality that comes their way? They'll think about it on their own. You hope they'll have trusted adults they can confide in and ask questions of. And you know they'll talk it over with their peers. Through the lens of their classmates, children attempt to make sense of the information they gather from their families, the media, their school experiences and other sources.

Many sexuality educators lament the misinformation children pick up from peers. But imagine what can happen when teachers and schools build peer networks that support the values of healthy whole-person sexuality: values such as respect for self and others, responsibility, joy in the physical body, clear interpersonal communication, getting help for troublesome feelings, and having questions answered. Through interactions with peers, students can learn more about the values of whole-person sexuality, develop the skills to practice these values, and experience the rich rewards they bring.

How the Learning Is Happening

Think for a moment about the kind of sexuality learning that goes on among your students. You might hear students tell jokes or stories with sexual subject matter, make passing comments of a suggestive nature, or insult one another using sexual terms. You might see behaviors or gestures on the playground that degrade someone. In a small-group project presented to the class, you might discern attitudes about gender roles.

The following are some fairly typical examples of sexuality learning among peers at elementary school:

- ◆ Jasmine executes a few bumps and grinds to mimic a “sexy dancer” she saw on TV last night.
- ◆ Brandon calls all the girls in his class “babes,” and then starts referring to a couple of the teachers as babes, too.
- ◆ Ezra calls Manuel a fag when he lets a goal get past him in a soccer game.
- ◆ Shauna tells Joel a bawdy joke, and both laugh loudly, although it’s not clear either understands it.
- ◆ Lina explains to Spencer that men have tiny babies in their sperm, that they plant their sperm by sticking their penis into a woman’s uterus, and that then the babies start to grow.
- ◆ James touches Katherine on the chest and tells her she has “tiny titties.”

Most of these examples don’t give a positive view of peers’ influence on sexuality learning. You may see children reinforcing sexual stereotypes, expressing intolerance, participating in sexual harassment and struggling along with insufficient factual knowledge. Often, this is the type of peer interaction adults notice kids learning from each other.

Yet other kinds of peer interactions can be very beneficial to sexuality learning. Have you ever seen things like these?

- ◆ Thomas, one of the most talented athletes in the class, works with Wayne on his softball throw. Thomas is genuinely pleased as he sees Wayne improve.
- ◆ Alejandro listens attentively and sympathetically as Kenny talks about the death of his pet rabbit over the weekend.
- ◆ Minnie and Lasondra work out an impressive hip-hop routine which they hope to present at the talent show.

- ♦ Marisa tells Tristan to cut it out when he starts teasing Claire and lifting her skirt. Marisa hangs out with Claire the rest of the recess.
- ♦ Andre is trying to explain to José how people use condoms like the one they found lying on the ground, but he can't quite get all the elements together. José suggests they ask their teacher, Mr. Casey, about it.

What are these peers teaching one another? To celebrate what each unique body can do, to listen and communicate well, to enjoy the physical pleasures of an active body. They are taking action to stop bullying or harassing behavior, and supporting each other in getting needed information from reliable sources. These are peer interactions that support healthy sexuality!

Values and Norms

Values are personal judgments about what matters in the world. Values inspire people to promote and protect what is important to them, and define what gives life excitement and meaning. Children learn their earliest values from their families. A family might value having dinner together, weekly church attendance or children doing chores on time.

Sexual values are also learned within the family from the earliest ages. What are roles for boys and girls, men and women? What is thought about the body and its functions? What terms are used for genitals?

Once children begin to attend school, they hear other values. As they grow, they will synthesize the values they have learned in their family and those they learn elsewhere. There will certainly be interesting interactions between peers about words for genitals, gender role expectations, future goals, understanding of human reproduction and appropriate outlets for curiosity. What is acceptable in one family will be taboo in another. What is socially appropriate at home may not be in the classroom.

Media also have an increasing influence on children's values as they grow. Television, magazines, music videos, video games and films are filled with images and stories that teach values. Many programs normalize strictly defined gender roles, or show violent models for solving problems. They may ridicule or show disdain for those who are different in some way, and glorify people with fantastic (and completely unreal) physical abilities and appearances.

As children work through the different possibilities presented to them through family, peers, school and the media, they develop their own unique set of personal values. The *norms* they perceive and encounter affect their value choices.

Norms are the beliefs and behaviors shared by and accepted within a group, including groups of peers and society in general. Norms are very powerful. Children tend to be uncomfortable with being different. Most prefer a sense of sameness with peers, through which they feel a greater sense of belonging.

Children (and adults) also have a tendency to *perceive* norms inaccurately. *Perceived norms* can have an even greater influence on people's values and behaviors than true norms. Tobacco use provides a good example. Children think smoking is far more common than it actually is. They consistently overestimate the number of teens and adults who smoke. They overestimate the number of their own peers who smoke. And those who make the greatest errors in their estimates are most likely to go on to become smokers themselves.

So what kinds of norms do children perceive about sexuality? If they look at the media, they're likely to assume that sex is the primary force in just about everyone's life; that most people want and expect sex when they date; that people enjoy sexually explicit humor; that women want a man to take care of them and protect them from harm; that men use violence to prove their masculinity; that girls would rather be popular than smart, and boys all want to excel in some kind of sport. They'll also get the impression that, by pre-adolescence, most children pursue sexually suggestive clothing, body movements and speech.

There are, of course, some people for whom these values are true. But they are *not* true for or representative of most people. Clearly, children look at a wide range of both real and perceived norms when they compare what goes on at home, in the classroom, on the playground and in the latest action/adventure film.

This variety can be confusing when children are trying to work out their values around whole-person sexuality. Their misperception of sexuality norms creates internal pressure for them to act in inappropriate ways. One of the best ways to help children develop a healthy approach to sexuality is to give them opportunities to correct their misperceptions about social and sexual norms. And one of the most powerful vehicles for doing this is through interactions with peers.

Using the Power of Peers

Peer groups influence children's attitudes, actions and skills. This kind of influence can go in many different directions. But schools and teachers can take steps to guide peer attitudes in healthy ways.

A good start is to give students opportunities to interact in different kinds of peer groups. Students can work in small groups in the class or in teams on the playground. They can be placed in groups with their 3 best friends or with children they don't know well. They can do a short 5-minute task together, or work on something over a period of days or weeks.

Students gain the most when they have a breadth of experience in such peer groups. For one project, Brad is the leader; for another, he follows someone else. In a small group exercise, Selena begins by talking quite a bit and ends by listening to others. Mei feels competent and successful on her kickball team, but has a harder time in her reading group. To lead and to follow, to speak up and to listen, to achieve and to struggle—are all essential parts of successful peer experiences.

Peer groups offer wonderful opportunities for children to be involved and belong. One of the most effective ways to correct

misperceptions of social norms is to let students talk about their own experiences, values and commitments before one of their most influential peer groups—their classmates. Have students take turns standing in front of a small group or the full class to talk about how they like to be treated by others.

As they listen to one another, what kinds of norms will your students perceive? Probably that their peers want to be treated fairly and with respect, that they want to be kind and helpful to others, want people to like them, and want to be seen for the unique individuals they are. This is a very different set of values than those seen in a typical night of television sitcoms!

When healthy and positive values are shared out loud with the group, it becomes easier for individual students to choose actions that support those values. If the class has made a commitment to the value of respect, Manuel can speak up when Ezra calls him a

Work with Broadly Shared Values

Children, like adults, will not agree on all things. But there are some values that are almost universal with children.

When asking children to talk about values with peers, here are some good examples to start with:

- Respect
- Helping others
- Taking smart steps to stay safe
- Staying tobacco and drug free
- Being a good role model for younger children
- Taking care of family and friends
- Having special responsibilities in the class or family
- Making special contributions to family, class or community

name. Will Manuel actually do this? Will Ezra change his behavior? Maybe, maybe not. But it's certainly more likely when both Manuel and Ezra know they belong to a community of peers who think Ezra should *not* engage in name-calling.

When peers actively share values, they also help each other learn skills to support these values. You can guide such learning through an organized class activity—for example, a series of lessons on speaking up when something doesn't feel right. The teacher could read a series of vignettes in which a child is being treated in a disrespectful or hurtful way by a peer, an older child, a clerk at a store or a stranger on the street.

In each instance, students could come up with a list of things the child could do and say. Then students could practice saying these things to one another and discuss which statements they think would work best. The chance that Manuel would speak up when Ezra harasses him is enhanced when this action has been modeled among peers.

You can also work with peer groups to build skills in informal ways, through teachable moments in class or on the playground. Imagine that Manuel and Ezra's teacher observes the interaction between the boys. He sees that Manuel handles it well, but wants to offer a little more reinforcement. So, later in class, he tells a story about someone calling other people names and asks the class to talk about what they think about it. Why do people do this? How does it feel?

In the students' comments, the message comes through loud and clear that name-calling is not acceptable behavior in this peer community. Manuel is proud of himself for speaking up, and Ezra understands that he will be outside his peer group's norms if he continues this behavior.

Strategies That Work

Much of this work with peers probably seems intuitive. Most experienced teachers have been doing these kinds of things with their students for years. But there are specific and conscious approaches you can take to strengthen the connections among your students and the impact of positive peer values and norms.

Here are some of the best strategies:

- ◆ **Speaking up.** It's important for children to make a personal commitment to the healthy values they embrace. You give them a chance to do this when you ask them to state their values in front of a small group or the full class. This can be done in group discussions, class presentations or special projects.
- ◆ **Hearing others.** It's just as important for children to listen to others share their healthy values. Many children benefit from practice in listening skills. They also develop a more accurate perception of peer norms when they hear others discuss their values.
- ◆ **Making public commitments.** Children strengthen their personal commitments to healthy values when they have a chance to make public pronouncements. This is easier for them to do when everyone in the class is doing it. Classes can wear badges proclaiming their commitment to respect one another; sign contracts that say they will stay tobacco free; or draw posters showing ways they enjoy being physically active and display their drawings in the hallways.
- ◆ **Teaching others.** Children also feel more committed to a value when they have a chance to teach others about it. Students can teach each other within small groups, share experiences in full-class discussions, or teach some of the things they know to younger kids.
- ◆ **Showing by actions.** A good community value for children to practice among their school peers is that of showing their commitments through actions. Class activities can give students

a chance to talk about ways they could speak up to support someone who is being harassed, be patient while someone is learning a new skill, or respect questions other students might raise during a health lesson. Teachers reinforce this behavior when they notice and validate it in the classroom or schoolyard.

- ♦ **Coaching one another.** Kids are great coaches. A good peer activity is to have students practice a skill in front of others and get feedback on how they're doing. The focus might be asking for help, speaking up about uncomfortable situations, kicking a ball, or planning a school project.

Promoting Healthy Peer Values About Sexuality

The next question is how to make these strategies specific to healthy whole-person sexuality. Some of your opportunities will come in informal, teachable moments. Others can be created through classroom lessons.

Following are some of the healthy values you might focus on and some positive norms associated with each value. Examples are provided showing ways a teacher might help peers promote those norms. Your own circumstances will always be unique, but these examples can suggest ideas that may work with your students too.

Value: We treat everyone here with dignity and respect.

Norm: Children interact without insults. In particular, they avoid derogatory comments about race, gender, appearance, sexual orientation or physical ability.

Example: Mrs. Sanders reads a story to her second graders about a boy who is teased by his classmates because he is shy and lives in the mountains. After many years, his classmates are amazed to discover that in his long walks to and from school every day, he has learned all the different calls of crows. He knows the happy crow,

the sad, the mother and father, the babies, even the lonely crow. He can sing them beautifully. They realize he has many good qualities they didn't see because he was different.*

Mrs. Sanders' students work in small groups to write and illustrate their own stories about a time when someone they knew—maybe someone in their group—was teased or hurt by insults. The groups share their stories and Mrs. Sanders guides a discussion about the children's experiences. She makes a point of mentioning how hurtful particular words can be, especially those that involve race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

The students then come up with some suggestions of ways they can respond when insults like this come up in school or elsewhere. The children suggest just walking away, telling the person, "You just insult yourself when you use a word like that," and standing up for friends if they are being teased.

*This is the story of *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima (Viking Press). Highly recommended!

Value: Think about and protect your future.

Norm: Children make smart choices about health, safety and community. They build skills they can continue to use as they grow.

Example: Ms. Ortíz teaches a sophisticated group of fourth graders who are finishing up a series of lessons about HIV. They understand that HIV is a virus that lives in the blood and other body fluids. They know that it can be passed from one person to another by blood-to-blood contact, including sharing needles for injection drug use. They know it can be passed through sexual intercourse.

Sandy tells Ms. Ortíz she is worried about how people are going to have babies. "If people use condoms whenever they have sex, no one will get AIDS, but no one will ever get pregnant again either. People will just die out."

Ms. Ortiz decides to use the idea of “thinking about and protecting your future” as a frame for Sandy’s question. She reminds Sandy that if neither person in a couple has HIV, they cannot pass the virus to each other. She tells the class that for many adults, a good reason to choose abstinence, or to use condoms if they do have sex, is to make sure they’re healthy in the future if they do decide to have a baby.

Ms. Ortiz says, “I hope these kinds of decisions about sex are many years away for all of you. We’ve already talked about the fact that activities like sexual intercourse are not healthy for kids your age. But I know you are already making decisions and choices about your future. Maybe you’ve decided not to use tobacco. Maybe you’ve decided to work hard in school so you can go to college. Let’s talk about some of the things you’re deciding today that are going to keep you healthy and excited about life in the future.”

In this discussion, she makes a point of having students state clearly to their peers their intentions and commitments about the future.

Value: The physical body is wonderful and fascinating.

Norm: Children enjoy the physical sensations of their bodies.

Example: Mr. Goldstein’s kindergarten class is dancing to a favorite jazz recording. The children jump and turn in free and inspiring ways, with little judgment or design. Mr. Goldstein wants to support this quality of freedom and enjoyment in movement, and looks for ways to have the kids embrace the pleasure of the experience. Today, when they finish their dance, he asks, “How was that?”

“Good!” says Azo.

“Let’s all say that!” says Mr. Goldstein, and all the children shout, “Good!”

“And how do you feel now?” asked Mr. Goldstein.

“Strong!” says Tyrelle.

“Let’s all say, ‘I feel strong!’” says Mr. Goldstein. And all the children call back, “I feel strong!”

“Aren’t these bodies of ours great?” he exclaims, and all the children enthusiastically agree as they wrap up the dancing activity and move on to storybook reading.

Value: Curiosity is good, and curiosity about sex is normal.

Norm: Children feel OK about having questions about sex and are comfortable asking a trusted adult for more information.

Example: Ms. Salameh broke up a fight between two of her first grade students on the playground. One of them had shown the other a sexually explicit image printed from an Internet site, and the second boy was going to tell on the first.

She acknowledged their curiosity while setting firm limits about bringing material like this to school, and the incident was successfully resolved. But she had some concerns because when she asked, neither boy was able to name someone he could talk to about sex. Her school has strict policies about this subject, so she could not offer direct answers to their questions herself.

Later that week, in a class activity about getting help from others, the students name people they could go to if they had troublesome feelings, were ill or needed some kind of help. They describe the adults in their lives who help them and talk about the ways friends can give one another help. The peer group resoundingly endorses the norm that seeking help when you are troubled is a good thing to do, and that there are people who can help.

Remembering the playground incident, Ms. Salameh decides to do just a little more with this lesson. She asks students to imagine they had a question they really wanted answered. Who could they go to who would help them get information? Are these the same people they might go to if they needed help? The students agree they are.

“What are some of the big questions you might have?” she asks. None of the students mention anything about sex, but Ms. Salameh concludes the lesson by mentioning that sometimes kids have questions about their bodies, about growing up, or about things grown-ups do that children do not. She reassures them that it’s perfectly normal for kids to have all kinds of questions, and encourages them to talk to their parents or some other adult in their lives when these things come up.

Value: Bullying has no place in this community.

Norms: Children speak up when they see a bullying incident and tell the bully to stop. They get help from an adult if necessary. They don’t join in bullying and they practice assertiveness skills that help them avoid being victims.

Example: Mr. Sanchez’s third grade class has been doing a lot of work to learn about bullying. Students have listened to stories about bullying, done roleplays in which they speak up and tell a bully to stop, and written a special class report on ways to keep bullying from happening. The students and teacher wore paper badges one day that said, “No bullying!” and Mr. Sanchez has noticed with pride that his students speak up on the playground when they see someone being picked on.

The teacher is surprised and disappointed, then, when he sees Art bumping up against Brandy during recess, grabbing her arms, touching her chest, and making kissing noises. Brandy tells Art to stop, but he doesn’t. Nearby, a group of boys from the class stand together and laugh at this scene.

Mr. Sanchez stops the incident and disciplines Art, and also speaks sharply to the group of boys. But he is troubled that this incident of harassment was treated so lightly by the students. The peer work on bullying had seemed so successful—why didn’t his students make the connection between what they had learned in class and what was happening during recess?

The next week, Mr. Sanchez brings the bullying prevention curriculum back to class, but makes a few changes. He reads the first vignette to the students, but changes the details so it tells a story of a girl being harassed by a boy instead of a little kid being picked on by a big kid.

He sets up a few roleplays where girls can speak up and tell someone to stop bothering them, and others where boys speak up to tell other boys to stop harassing a girl. One afternoon, the class has an interesting discussion about the ways girls sometimes harass boys—teasing, touching, insulting—and students do some roleplays about how to stop this, too.

At the end of the week, the class has a contest to choose a new slogan for a class badge. The winning slogan is “We respect girls and boys.”

An Influence for Good

One of the essential tasks of childhood is the exploration of different values and behaviors. Children change their minds about all kinds of things. This week the best friend is Elena, and next week it's Tammi. Today the favorite food is macaroni and cheese, and next week it's tacos. Yesterday, the favorite color was blue, and today it's red.

Some of children's experiments will be more successful than others. Those that bring pleasure and reward are more likely to become an ongoing part of their preferences and values. By “trying on” all of these different experiences, they begin to find out who they really are.

The opportunity to perform well before peers is a powerful reinforcer for children. Many develop passions for activities where they experience success in the eyes of others—playing softball, telling jokes and being the class clown, reading, painting, wearing nice clothes, dancing, or knowing everything there is to know about a popular TV show or singer.

Teachers can use this power in creative ways by giving children successful experiences in stating their commitments to values that support healthy whole-person sexuality. Children can learn a great deal among their peers about showing and receiving respect, listening and communicating, and supporting one another.

They can learn to be pleased with the experience and abilities of their physical bodies. They can learn that it's OK to have questions about sex, their bodies and reproduction, and that it is good to ask a trustworthy adult—a parent, a teacher, a recreational counselor—to help them find answers.

5 Information for Teachers

Sexuality education is always going on. The only real choice schools and teachers have is whether it is presented through a formal curriculum and in a thoughtful, conscious way, or ignored and communicated unconsciously.

It is the philosophy of this book that a formal program of comprehensive health education, including attention to sexuality education, is the best approach. Realistically, however, this is not going to happen in all schools. Fortunately, conscious sexuality education is always possible, and every teacher can make the choice to pursue it.

Knowing the Goals

Planned sexuality education is a specific intervention that allows educators to identify in advance the kinds of information, attitudes and skills they want to transmit to children at different ages. It is important for you to know the goals of your school or district's sexuality education program. You will also want to think about the goals that resonate for you personally as an educator and advocate for children.

Overall goals vary from one community or district to another, and are most useful when they are general enough to encompass the breadth of information necessary for effective sexuality education, yet specific enough to keep program planning and curriculum content on track. A good example was developed by the National Guidelines Task Force in 1991, and updated in 1996. This group of highly respected sexuality educators identified four primary goals for sexuality education:

- ◆ Provide accurate information about human sexuality.
- ◆ Offer opportunities for students to explore and question values, increase self-esteem, develop insights about human behaviors, and understand obligations and responsibilities to others.
- ◆ Help students develop communication, decision-making, assertiveness and peer-refusal skills, and the ability to have satisfying relationships.
- ◆ Help young children learn to be responsible in relationships, which sets the foundation for responsibility in sexual relationships when they are older.

Appropriate Content

Effective sexuality education must be age-appropriate. Parents and teachers who oppose sexuality education—and they are in the minority—often do so because they have misconceptions about recommended content at various grade levels.

Topics most typical in curricula for early elementary years (grades K-3) include:

- ◆ Identifying roles and responsibilities of families.
- ◆ Understanding and managing feelings.
- ◆ Getting help for troublesome feelings.
- ◆ Understanding similarities and differences between boys and girls.
- ◆ Understanding and coping with changes in the family.
- ◆ Understanding basic concepts of reproduction.
- ◆ Understanding basic concepts of human growth and development.
- ◆ Increasing awareness and appreciation of differences among human beings, including appearance, family structure, physical development, abilities, and feelings in different situations.

- ◆ Exploring feelings and attitudes about peer relationships.
- ◆ Preventing sexual abuse.
- ◆ Identifying the people and places where children can get help with problems.

In the *upper* elementary years (grades 4–6), programs may continue to visit these topics. Curricula for grades 4–6 typically add some more sophisticated subjects as well, including:

- ◆ Increasing knowledge of the physical, emotional and social changes that accompany puberty.
- ◆ Building social skills—listening, starting conversations, making decisions and being assertive.
- ◆ Increasing motivation and building skills to postpone initiation of sexual intercourse.
- ◆ Providing more specific information about HIV and other STD.
- ◆ Increasing acceptance of differences in values, lifestyles, customs and beliefs.
- ◆ Increasing awareness of and building skills for preventing or getting help with sexual abuse.

Programs vary greatly in their content. This is necessary because each program should be tailored to the needs, values and interests of the local community and its families. For example, a progressive school district in a “high risk” area may quite appropriately deal with issues of adolescent pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted disease with fourth or fifth graders. Other school districts postpone these topics because they haven’t observed the need for such education among their elementary school students.

It’s always advisable, however, to give teachers the freedom to answer *all* questions (other than personal) that come up in the classroom. The freedom to ask and get age-appropriate answers insures that children will receive the information they seek at the time they most need it.

What Do Teachers Need to Know?

Three levels of learning are important for educators:

- ♦ **Personal feelings and values.** The first area to address is the development of a deeper understanding of personal feelings and values about sexuality. Teachers can think about their own upbringing and sort out their beliefs on a range of sexual topics. It's critical that teachers be able to talk with children about sexual values without imposing their own. This takes thought and practice!
- ♦ **Knowledge.** The next level of individual preparation deals with knowledge. Teachers will be more effective and comfortable as sexuality educators when they have information about anatomy and physiology, sexual development, puberty, sexually transmitted disease and contraception. It isn't necessary to be a sexuality expert, but it's important to have some basic facts. And it's essential for teachers to be aware of what they *don't* know and where to go for additional information. (See the Resources section for some suggestions.)
- ♦ **Skills.** The final component of preparation is skills building. This includes the ability to facilitate group and individual activities in the classroom, maintain an appropriate tone and structure to lessons on sexuality, and respond in an open and welcoming way to children's questions, whatever these may be. It's also important to know how to use sexual language appropriately, answer questions effectively, and break down abstract concepts into terms children can understand.

Some teachers are able to participate in comprehensive training through workshops or seminars. This is ideal. But even if such training isn't available, teachers can work on their own and with colleagues to explore their personal values, build knowledge, and practice and develop skills for teaching sexuality.

Areas for Personal Reflection

- ◆ **Language.** How was sex talked about in your family while you were growing up? What terms were used for genitals, breasts and buttocks? What language was used to discuss pregnancy? menstruation? puberty? same-sex relationships? masturbation? sexual intercourse? other kinds of sexual touching? *How do these experiences influence your comfort and skill talking with students about sexuality?*
- ◆ **Touching.** How much and what kind of touch did you see in your family? Did your parents touch affectionately? How often? What kind of touch did you receive from family members? *How do these experiences affect your feelings about touching students, or seeing them touch each other?*
- ◆ **Nudity.** How was nudity dealt with in your home while you were growing up? How do you feel about nudity in your home now? about art with nude subjects? about nudity in films or plays? *How do these feelings influence your comfort with your students' physicality, or with sexual allusions or gestures they may make?*
- ◆ **Toys and games.** What kinds of toys and games did you play as a child? How did your understanding of gender roles influence your play? Did you play with “boy” toys, “girl” toys or both? *What kind of play do you like to see children engage in now? What steps, conscious or otherwise, do you take to influence your students' choices about play?*
- ◆ **Body changes.** What do you remember about your body growing and changing? What was puberty like for you? Do you remember your first wet dream or first period? Was there anything you wish you'd known, or any kind of support you wish you'd had, before you went through puberty? *What would you like your students to know about their own growth and development?*
- ◆ **Friends.** Who were your best friends when you were in elementary school? Were they the same sex as you? What kinds of activities did you enjoy together? How did other people see your friendships? *What feelings do you have about your students' friendships?*

- ♦ **Values.** What were the important sexual values in your family, and how did you learn about them? What did your parents think about sex outside of marriage? birth control? same-sex relationships? abortion? masturbation? children having sexual feelings? teen sexual activity? seductive dress or behavior? sensual dancing? pornography or erotica? having multiple partners? the roles of men and women in a family? *What values would you like your students to learn about sexuality and relationships?*

Challenges and Skills

What are some of the areas where you feel personal challenges in sexuality education? Where do you feel more confident?

Here are some questions that can help you identify areas where you might be more or less prepared for teaching about sexuality:

- What are some of my values that affect how I feel and think about sexuality teaching?
- How do my feelings and attitudes differ from my students?
- How comfortable and skilled am I in discussing sexuality in ways that my students can understand and my school and community can support?
- Is there some topic, perspective or activity in my school's sexuality curriculum that I completely embrace and support? Anything that I disagree with strongly and would prefer not to teach my students?
- How do I respond when students ask me personal questions in general? When they ask me personal questions about my sexual experience?
- How confident am I about my factual knowledge concerning human sexuality? Reproduction? Growth and development? Children's conceptual understandings of sexuality?

Working with Colleagues

- ◆ **Your strengths as an educator.** Make a list of 10 qualities you have that make you a good sexuality educator. Ask 1 or more of your colleagues to do the same. Share your lists, and help each other complete your lists if you're having trouble coming up with 10 things.
- ◆ **Looking at resources.** Gather some of the resources for sexuality education available in your school or district (or that you personally own). Ask different colleagues to look over 1 or 2 items each. Have a follow-up meeting and review the materials. Reviewers can report on whether they liked this resource, would use it in their classrooms, or would adapt it. Do this same activity to check out different resource sites on the Internet or books from the library.
- ◆ **Identifying clear goals.** Get a copy of the written goals for sexuality education in your school or district. Have an informal discussion with some of your colleagues about these goals. How are the goals currently being met? Are there more effective ways to meet them using some of the suggestions in this book, or in other resources you've seen?
- ◆ **Talking about the whole person.** Have an informal discussion with colleagues about whole-person sexuality. What are some of the ways you see your students expressing their sexual beliefs and attitudes? (gender role expectations, communication styles, levels of respect, comfort in the physical body, ways of touching peers, etc.) What happens in the classroom and on the schoolyard to support the development of healthy whole-person sexuality?

Special Concerns About Teaching Sexuality

Many teachers have concerns about teaching sexuality.

Here are some of the most typical worries, along with some suggestions to resolve them.

Will children ask embarrassing questions I can't answer?

Yes, almost certainly. But in time and with practice, you'll be less likely to be embarrassed and more skilled at developing easy-to-understand, age-appropriate answers. You probably already have most of the skills you need, since they are similar to the skills you use in other areas of teaching.

Will I feel comfortable saying sexual words?

A good way to find out is to practice outside of the classroom. Talk with your own kids or children in your family about sexuality. Talk with your friends and colleagues. Pull together a teacher discussion group and practice saying sexual words and talking about sexuality together. Read passages about sexuality education out loud (you could use some of the material in this book). The more you practice saying these things, the more comfortable and natural it will be, in the classroom or anywhere else.

Will students take the information seriously?

Your students may bring some embarrassment to the topic of sexuality if this is what they have learned among peers or at home. But sexuality and its related issues are truly interesting to children. You have a wonderful opportunity to model an approach that gives attention and respect to this topic. A little humor, even some uncomfortable giggling, is perfectly acceptable as students find their own path to greater comfort with the topic.

How far should I go in answering questions?

Use the guidelines in Chapter 3. Base your answers on your students' maturity and developmental level, your school's policies

and the situation at hand. Ask questions to check students' understanding and interest as you build your answers. Remember that sometimes the "less" answer will be clearer, especially for very young children, and that the greatest risk of the "more" answer is boring students with information outside their interest.

Will parents get upset about the lessons?

Parents have a special and important role in school-based sexuality education. One of the most important things they do is give permission for their children to participate in the lessons. Chapter 6 suggests ways to build and use parental support and involvement in a proactive and productive way.

If I teach about sexuality, will children come to me with stories about being abused? What do I do then?

If a sexuality education program meets its goals, children *should* come to you or some other responsible adult if they are being abused. Once again, proactive preparation will give you the greatest confidence for dealing with circumstances like these. Find out who the designated reporter is in your school or district. Ask for teacher trainings that review assessment of child sex abuse, mandatory reporting requirements, and steps to take to make a report. Talk to colleagues about their experiences, both to hear the inspiration of success stories and to plan for possible obstacles if you find yourself in a reportable situation. (See the Appendix for a list of Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse.)

Creating a Positive Learning Environment

An essential step in effective sexuality education is creating an environment where children feel comfortable, safe and motivated to participate. You can do this by conducting warm-up activities to establish the tone, setting groundrules, listening carefully to children, accepting their initial "giggles and wiggles," and answering their questions honestly.

Warm-Up Activities

Most sexuality programs begin with an activity designed to foster a good climate for learning. Warm-up activities ought to be easy for everyone to get involved in and be related in some way to the content of the program. At their best, these activities break the ice, decrease tension, help children get to know one another (if they don't already), and increase energy for the upcoming program. Children find out through experience that they'll have fun while they learn.

There are a few types of warm-ups that are used over and over in sexuality education. The Name Game asks students to introduce themselves by giving their first names and a positive adjective that begins with the first letter of their name. For example, "I'm Popular Pam." The fun comes when each new person has to introduce everyone who has spoken before, using the adjectives as well as the names.

Children who read can do a scavenger hunt, looking for a classmate who is an only child, has a mother who works outside the home, has a new baby in the family, and so on. Physical activities such as group stretches or adaptations of musical chairs are great for creating energy.

Groundrules

Equally important in setting the tone is the establishment of groundrules. Groundrules help children behave in ways that are respectful of one another. They allow children to feel safe enough to express their honest feelings or ask whatever questions they want. Some teachers have students create their own groundrules by telling a story that goes something like this:

On the first day of the sexuality education lessons, Maria asked, "Can a man have a baby?" Some of her classmates nearly fell out of their chairs laughing. Maria felt terrible, and sat with her head on her desk for the remainder of the class. What rules could have been made to keep this from happening?

Examples of Groundrules

- We respect one another. We don't use put-downs or teasing.
- Everyone's feelings are important.
- You can ask anything you want. There are no dumb questions.
- In the class discussions, we won't ask personal questions. We won't talk about personal matters such as parents' or friends' behavior.
- It's OK to pass on any activity or question.
- If you talk about the lessons outside of the classroom, don't use people's names or talk about what other people have said.

Organized Chaos

The best sexuality education sessions are usually quite lively. Students are actively involved. Discussion develops spontaneously. If all happens as it's supposed to, these classes are bound to be noisy. Students sometimes buzz with side conversations, not because they are bored but because they're fully engaged in the topic and can't wait to make their comments publicly.

While it's sometimes necessary to quiet things down a little, children are distracted from meaningful learning if a teacher spends most of the time on discipline. If a session seems particularly unruly, you might ask the class to suggest ways of dealing with the problem. You could say, "You're all so excited, everyone is talking at once. We can't hear one another. What do you think we should do so we all have a chance to speak and hear what each person is saying?"

Giggling

Teachers often ask, "Will my students take the program seriously enough?" Some teachers want to keep discussions of sexuality fairly serious because they don't want to be accused of treating the

subject frivolously. But experienced teachers know that telling students they're expected to act very mature and not be silly can set a restrictive tone that isn't helpful to the learning.

Why do students giggle? Usually for the same reasons adults do. Most often, it's a vehicle for releasing nervousness or discomfort.

When we tell children not to giggle, we inhibit their natural behavior, causing them to censor what they say and do. Most giggling takes place at the start of a program. It may be the first time children have had this kind of discussion in school. They may not be sure how to behave. They may have picked up the idea that sex is a taboo topic that should not be mentioned.

You can help them understand their feelings by explaining the purpose of giggling. Give them a couple of minutes to get all the giggling out. Giggle along with them if you feel like it. Most teachers find this natural behavior decreases with time.

Teaching About Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is one of the most difficult topics for adults to explain to children. You don't want to scare them, but you do want them to be aware of the problem. You want them to develop skills that can help them avoid or get away from dangerous situations and know how to get help if something happens to them.

Many curricula address this issue by talking about "good touch" and "bad touch." But there are problems with this approach. It suggests to children that bad touching occurs when they are touched on the sexual parts of their bodies: the vulva, breasts, penis or buttocks. Because young children are concrete thinkers, they interpret this to mean that *all* touch on the sexual parts of the body is bad touching. This is *not* the message you want them to hear!

Children need to know that some touches on the sexual parts of the body are desirable and enjoyable, and that when they grow up

they will probably want those touches from some special person or persons. They may already enjoy touching some of these places on themselves. Even when touch is not desired it can feel good, and this is also confusing for children who have been abused.

A better way to talk about sexual abuse with children is to teach them four clues that suggest there may be problems. **If any of these things are happening, children should talk to a responsible and trustworthy adult for help:**

- **Someone wants to look at or touch the sexual parts of a child's body for no good reason.** There *are* good reasons, such as a doctor giving a physical exam, a parent bathing a young child, or a parent checking a child's injury. Sometimes friends like to give each other playful pats on the buttocks after a good game. This kind of touch is OK if everyone is comfortable with it.
- **There is a power imbalance.** An older, more powerful person—typically a teenager or adult—tries to get a child to do something he or she doesn't really want to do. In some cases, it can be a child of the same age who is bigger, stronger or more intimidating. The important thing here is to clarify the power difference in an abusive situation.
- **Something feels troublesome about the situation.** It doesn't feel comfortable, or a child gets a troublesome feeling inside (an “uh-oh” kind of feeling).
- **Something is secret.** The adult or teenager asks the child to keep the behavior secret or threatens harm if the child tells; or the child senses the behavior would not be happening if there were other adults around.

Children who are guided by these clues will be able to make good judgments and seek help in many different kinds of exploitive or questionable situations.

Taking It to the Classroom

You may have a curriculum that specifically addresses sexuality, or one that talks more generally about family and personal health. You may have no health curriculum at all, or something very limited in its scope and range.

No matter what you start with as a foundation, you can use the following three steps to bring a conscious (and conscientious) approach to your sexuality education efforts:

- 1. Assess your existing lesson content.** Health education is an obvious first place to look for content related to whole-person sexuality, but you may want to look at other areas as well—current events, social history, physical education, and expressive arts such as music, painting and theater.
- 2. Think about ways this content relates to whole-person sexuality.** Does it raise issues of gender roles and expectations? Teach skills for clear communication? Help students notice emotions or physical sensations? Celebrate the things students' bodies can do? Talk about ways people help and respect one another? Teach assertiveness or decision-making skills? Encourage setting goals for the future? Any of these topics and dozens more are relevant to sexuality.
- 3. Choose an appropriate intervention, depending on your setting and the circumstances.** There are 3 ways you can bring forth a conscious approach to sexuality education in any lesson. Which choice you make will depend on your students' interest and personalities, your school and district guidelines for sexuality education, your own skills and level of comfort with the material, what kind of content you have already covered in class, and what you plan to cover in the future.
 - **Conscious teaching.** Notice the ways your class responds to the lesson content. Make comments or suggestions that help them focus on some aspect of a lesson that reinforces

whole-person sexuality, such as feeling proud of what their bodies can do.

- **Adaptation.** Make a simple adaptation to an already existing lesson. For example, in a health lesson about how the muscles move the body, you could add a short physical exercise. Students could stand at their desks and feel their muscles as they lift their arms, stomp their feet, smile, or rock back and forth with their feet flat on the ground. This short exploration of body awareness and pride adds to the foundation that allows children to develop into sexually healthy individuals.
- **Addition.** Bring in an activity that represents a formal approach to sexuality education. For example, in a third- or fourth-grade lesson about growing, changing bodies, you might present an activity about the kinds of changes boys and girls go through as they approach and enter puberty. You could include emotional as well as physical changes. Some students may already be experiencing some of these changes by this age.

An Example: The HealthSmart Program

The three steps of assessing your lesson, thinking about how the content relates to whole-person sexuality, and choosing an appropriate intervention could work with almost any lesson content, but will be especially relevant to health lessons. Below is an example using an existing elementary health program. After reviewing this example, think about how you could use these steps with your own lessons.

The *HealthSmart* program, published by ETR Associates, is a developmentally sequenced, comprehensive school health program for grades K–4. The activities and content are theory-based, using the Health Belief Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The cornerstone of this approach is that children can use information, attitudes, skills and support systems to make smart choices about

their health. By making meaningful health choices today, they will develop the commitment and build the skills to continue to make smart choices throughout their teen and adult years.

The curriculum places a heavy emphasis on peer relations. Through work with peers, children get a more accurate sense of social norms (e.g., most children, teens and adults do not smoke and do not want to; people enjoy being treated with respect) as well as develop a sense of responsibility and belonging. The *HealthSmart* program does not have a specific sexuality component, but each grade level includes a unit on “Personal and Family Health” that lays important foundations for sexuality education.

Imagine that you are a second grade teacher using the *HealthSmart* program. **Here’s how the steps apply:**

Step 1: You assess your existing lesson content. You’re looking over the Personal and Family Health unit with your commitment to conscious teaching about sexuality in mind. You see an activity called “Are Families on TV Real?” that involves a discussion of the kinds of behavior students see in families on TV.

Step 2: You think about ways this content relates to whole-person sexuality. The main areas of focus are reality versus make-believe (TV families/real families), the consequences of put-down humor, and ways families can support children. You see a clear link to whole-person sexuality in the attention given to respect and support.

Step 3: You choose an appropriate intervention, depending on your setting and the circumstances. Examples of all 3 interventions—conscious teaching, adaptation and addition—are provided below.

Conscious Teaching

When you're teaching the activity, a student describes the plot of a recent sitcom. The husband decides he'll stay home and do housework for the day because he thinks it's easy. But he can't do anything right. He spills the mop and bucket, gets the cleaning brush caught in the toilet and burns the macaroni and cheese. At the end of the show, he's sitting exhausted wearing a silly apron. His wife comes in and cleans up the mess he's made. At first, she acts like she's going to be nice to him, but then she's not because she's so mad that he's never nice to her after she's had a hard day.

Because the curriculum addresses stereotyping, in the discussion you talk with students about the kinds of things men and women do. You ask them if they have ever known a man who does housework. Lots of students have dads, brothers or neighbors who do. Some of the boys in the class have household chores. None of them has ever known anyone as inept as the guy on this TV show. The students agree that both men and women cook and do housework, and by the end of the discussion they don't even think the show sounds funny.

Adaptation

Following the Teacher Guide, you tell students that sometimes TV can help them learn and understand things, but other times it can hurt or confuse them. TV may change what they expect from themselves, other people or their families. Then you come back to the sitcom plot.

You adapt the lesson by choosing to explore further the issue of sex-role stereotyping. You ask students what that show might have been teaching people about what men and women are like. You suggest they think especially about younger kids who might not know as much as they do. The students say it teaches people that men are dumb, that men and women fight a lot, and that women should do housework and men should not. They agree that these aren't very good lessons, and that these aren't the kinds of lessons they learn from their real families.

Addition

The discussion about sex-role stereotyping has been lively. You've also seen a lot of stereotyping happening on the playground lately, so you decide to expand a little more on this topic and add to the lesson.

You find a storybook about a girl who decides she wants to play on the touch football team. At first, the boys tease her. They tell her she can't play because she's a girl. Then they tell her she can't play because she's never played before. Finally, the teachers tell the boys they have to let the girl play. The girl turns out to be a good player, and makes an important pass in their big game.

After this story, the students draw pictures of things they would like to try someday that they have never done before. They come up with a range of dreams and plans, some of which definitely cross gender stereotypes.

This Fine Art

It's possible that the art of teaching is never more finely drawn than in the arena of sexuality education. Teachers need to know facts. They need to know school and district policy. They need to understand child development generally, and children's understanding of sexuality specifically. They need to know their own students' unique skills and interests, and have a strong and trusting relationship with their class. Bringing all of these elements together into a coherent classroom experience can seem like a challenge indeed.

But you can see how exciting the whole-person approach to sexuality education is. The same strategies that help children be competent and fulfilled people generally also lead to the development of healthy sexuality. Sexuality is an integrated part of each one of us, inseparable from our whole selves. This approach allows you, as a teacher, to confirm all the ways you are helping your students achieve personal success in their lives today. You can also

see how you are helping them set a positive and healthy foundation for the future.

This is the art of all good teaching. It is about caring and concern, and respect for self and others. It is about believing in children's abilities, and being willing to be surprised and taught by them. And, of course, it is about using your own talents and skills to inspire them to be the best they can be.

6 **Parents and Teachers as Partners**

Teachers who are successful in sexuality education have several key skills. They have learned to see the world through their students' eyes and to frame their answers and teaching in ways children can use. They have learned to use peer groups to reinforce healthy values about sexuality. They have learned information about human sexuality and reproduction.

Most use another skill as well—the ability to partner with parents and families. Parents, like peers, are often blamed for much of what is wrong with childhood sexuality education. But, in fact, most parents share values very much in keeping with the things teachers want in sexuality education. Parents want what's best for their children—to receive quality, age-appropriate education in all the areas they need to succeed as adults—and they want to do their best for their children—to talk with them, love them and support them in healthy ways.

Parents generally do a pretty good job at these things. Sometimes teachers, social workers or health professionals have the most contact with particularly troubled families, which can skew their view of all parents. This is why it's so important to find opportunities to interact with many kinds of parents and families.

Parents' Involvement in Sexuality Education

Parents, like children, need to hear the right messages about sexuality education. Whenever you conduct a program with young children, inform parents ahead of time about the specific content,

aims and underlying values. Let them know what kind of family involvement is built into the teaching.

By involving parents from the start, you communicate the value your school places in their partnership. You also give them advance notice that their children will be bringing home activities based on the lessons so they'll feel better prepared when family activity sheets come home or you guide their child to ask them a question he or she has raised about sexuality.

Your goals should include giving parents a say in the kind of sexuality-related information their children will receive, and suggesting ways that parents can communicate about sexuality with their sons and daughters at home. Schools that involve parents in this way usually have more comprehensive sexuality programs with fewer restrictions on subject matter.

Here are some strategies for achieving these goals:

- ♦ **Involve parents as members of an ongoing advisory committee** that reviews program content and approves all print and audiovisual resources.
- ♦ **Invite parents to a meeting** so they can find out more about the program and view the lesson plans, family activities, books or videos you plan to use.
- ♦ **Give parents the opportunity to withdraw their children** from the program. There are some people who, for religious or personal reasons, prefer not to have their children participate in discussions of sexuality outside their homes. Schools must respect these parents' beliefs.
- ♦ **Use family activity sheets** that students can complete with their parents. This supports the role of parents as the primary sexuality educators of their children.
- ♦ **Send home an evaluation form** at the end of the lessons to get parents' input about the effectiveness of the program.
- ♦ **Offer programs for parents** to help them become more effective sexuality educators at home. In some communities,

such programs are offered by school counselors, social workers or community educators.

Be Realistic

The parents of your students hold a range of values and attitudes related to sexuality education. The continuum probably includes a good bit of territory along the conservative/progressive political spectrum, with varied attitudes about abortion, birth control, sexual activity outside marriage, gay and lesbian families, or assisted reproduction technologies.

Some parents will be comfortable talking about sexuality with their children and look forward to doing so; others will not. Some parents will be enthusiastic supporters of your school's sexuality education plans; some will be reticent, uncertain or downright distrustful. Some will have had positive experiences with programs their older children completed; others will have had negative ones.

When schools and teachers recognize this, they can make better decisions for parents and students alike. It is important to give

Benefits of Parent Workshops

When parents have a chance to participate in workshops on being effective sexuality educators in their homes, the schools and students benefit too.

- Parents are strengthened in their ability to take on an active role as sexuality educators of their children.
- Workshops build stronger and more active parental support for school sexuality education programs.
- Workshops give parents a chance to network, so they can speak up in a unified voice to support school programs.
- Parents become advocates for responsible, respectful media that shape healthy sexuality.

parents a forum to express their concerns and validate the essential nature of their role as sexuality educators for their children.

A realistic approach to the range of parental opinion protects the rights of children whose parents support the program. Opponents of school sexuality education can become vociferous about their opinions, but the majority of U.S. adults *do* support sexuality education in schools. Parents of school-age children are even more likely to support such programs than the public at large.

Values Are Important

Values are important to parents, teachers and students. Chapter 4 talked about the benefits of having students identify and discuss shared values with their peer group. This same strategy can help create connections and collaborations with parents. When you talk with parents about the underlying values of your school's sexuality education program and the values they hold for their children, frame these in the most universal perspective possible.

For example, a goal of your sexuality education program might be to help children acquire age-appropriate answers to their questions about how the body grows and changes, human relationships, sexuality and human reproduction. Most parents will support this goal. From the vantage point of your shared perspectives, you can work more effectively at ironing out the important details (e.g., just what exactly are “age-appropriate” answers?).

To help parents build a better understanding of the need for childhood sexuality education, talk with them about the foundations of healthy whole-person sexuality. You might mention things such as teaching children to treat one another with respect; building communication skills; or using dance, movement or physical education to help children enjoy having an active and healthy body.

You can show parents the guidelines and strategies you use to teach children to identify troublesome feelings and get help. You can describe how your program helps children think about whom they

can go to with questions about sexuality or their bodies. You can give examples of ways the program teaches children to make healthy choices and get support from peers.

It's also important to teach parents about the influence of the media on children's sexual understanding. While they will be aware of the more blatant aspects (such as sexually explicit scenes in movies), some of the subtle influences may be less evident to them. What do parents think about programming and advertising on children's TV shows that emphasize limited roles for girls or violent behaviors for boys? that show cartoon characters wearing suggestive garb? that pressure girls to act more grown up by wearing make-up?

Sexuality education programs are not value free. But successful programs are based on values that can be widely shared and supported by parents and teachers alike.

Make It Easy and Rewarding

Whole-person sexuality concepts usually make sense to parents, especially when they can see ways to participate in supporting the goals. Parental resistance to sexuality education is often based on uncertainty or discomfort with the topic.

Parents have many of the same apprehensions teachers do—Will I be able to answer my kid's questions? Will I be embarrassed? Will I give the kinds of messages I want my child to have? Will I say things that will confuse my child, or take away his or her innocence? In a whole-person approach to sexuality, parents can find a wealth of things to say and do with their kids that support healthy development and stay within their family's values.

The importance of helping parents have a good experience with your program cannot be overstated. In fact, sexuality educator Lynn Leight (1994) says that while many factors influence the outcome of sexuality programs, parents and caregivers may be the single most important factor in their success. She describes parents

and families as the “living laboratory” that tests and then either accepts or rejects classroom learning.

Use some of the family activities described at the end of this chapter, along with informational letters, parent/teacher meetings or other strategies, to keep parents involved and informed. Give them opportunities to talk with their children about personal values. Support and confirm their competence as parents and their importance as sexuality educators of their children.

A solid foundation of outreach and planning can keep parents informed, confident and committed to your program. When they see the ways your sexuality education approach confirms their own values and beliefs, the results of this “living laboratory” are far more likely to be favorable to everyone involved in the process—teachers, parents and students.

Part of a Team

Children thrive when their experiences at home reinforce and reflect the kinds of things they are learning in the classroom. In sexuality education, this becomes especially important. Parents and schools can work as a team to promote healthy values and norms.

Together, parents and teachers can encourage kids to enjoy their bodies, respect others, and be comfortable with the physical changes that come with growing up. They can teach children to get help for troublesome feelings. They can show that they are supportive and credible sources of information when children have questions. Families and schools working as a team to promote these values provide a reassuring response to the hazardous messages about sexuality children hear through the media.

Most important, parents and schools can give children a sense of their uniqueness and importance to their community and families. Children who hear and embrace this message will have great resilience and resources as they continue to learn and grow.

Family Activities

Family activities support and reinforce classroom learning and keep parents informed about what's going on in the classroom. They also create easy opportunities for parents to have discussions with their children about values—one of the things many parents really want from school-based sexuality education.

Single page “family sheets” with instructions or guidelines are a good format. These worksheets might have blank spaces for answers children and parents come up with together. Or they might simply suggest ideas for family discussions or other activities. Keep the design simple and the reading level easy. You may have to adjust the complexity or focus of an activity depending on your students' grade and developmental level.

Feel free to adapt the following activities to suit the needs of your students and their families.

Tips for Parents

At the beginning of your program, send home a sheet with suggestions for parents on how to talk to their children about sexuality.

Some ideas you might include:

- **Welcome your child's questions.** You are the most important sexuality educator in your child's life.
- **You are teaching your child about sexuality all the time,** even when the topic is something else. You can show affection in your family or talk about values. You can listen carefully to your child's questions or hug and hold your child. These actions give your child positive messages about curiosity, caring and being special. These help set the foundation for a healthy approach to learning about sexuality.
- **Create chances to talk** with your child about values.
- **Bring up topics yourself.** Many children don't ask questions.

(continued)

- **Use everyday experiences to raise topics.** You might refer to a TV show, a friend's behavior or something your child saw in school or in the neighborhood.
 - **It's OK not to know all the answers.** You can say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll find out." Be sure you *do* find out, and follow up soon.
 - **Don't worry about not knowing how to answer.** You can say, "This is hard to explain, but I'll do my best." Take a minute to think about what you want to say. After you answer, say, "Let's see how I did. Can you explain the answer to me now?"
 - **Have both public and private talks.** Public talks (around other family members) show children that these are good things to talk about. Private talks (just you and your child) give your child a chance to bring up personal concerns.
-

This Great Body!

As part of a lesson about ways to enjoy the things our bodies can do, have students draw a picture or write a story about something physical they like to do.

In a family sheet, ask parents to talk with their child about the drawing. Parents can describe physical things they enjoy now, and things they enjoyed doing when they were children.

Media Watch

After a lesson on the things we learn from TV, ask parents and children to watch a TV program together. Give parents guide questions to use for discussion afterwards.

Suggest they use this opportunity to talk about personal values and ways their own family's values are similar to or different from what they saw in the program. They could talk about gender roles;

violence; whether the characters treated each other with respect; sexual humor or other sexual references; or use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

Questions you could use:

- What did you like about this program? (Both parent and child answer.)
 - Is there anything you didn't like? (Both parent and child answer.)
 - If you were making a TV show for kids your age, what story would it tell? (Child answers.)
-

Asking Questions

If you teach a series of lessons on identifying people students can go to when they have questions or feel troubled, use a family activity that has parents and children practice asking and answering questions.

Give instructions to parents on playing a Question Game with their child:

- The parent says, "I have a question for you," and asks the child a simple personal question (e.g., What's your favorite color? food? shirt? TV show? book?). The child answers.
 - Then the child says, "I have a question for you," and asks the parent a question.
 - Parent and child repeat this 2 or 3 times. The parent might ask slightly more personal questions each time (e.g., What's something that scared you when you were younger? What's something you've done that you're very proud of?).
 - The parent closes by asking, "Do you have any more questions for me? I hope you'll ask me questions any time you have them."
-

Planning for Your Future

An important part of sexuality education is helping children begin to understand the consequences of their choices and develop a sense of their own future. Children who have a personal sense of future (that they will live into adulthood, that they will achieve things, that they will have work and a family) are more likely to take steps to protect that future.

After a lesson about planning, making choices, thinking about the future, taking risks or other related topics, use a family activity to encourage discussion between parents and children. Describe your lesson briefly, then give parents some questions to talk over with their child.

Some possible questions:

- What will you be like when you're a grown-up? Do you think you'll be different from how you are now?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- Do you want to be a parent? How many children do you want to have?
- What about you will make you a good parent?
- What's the most exciting thing about growing up?

Suggest that parents use these questions as a way to talk about family values. They can talk about what it means to be a parent. They can answer questions about reproduction. They can ask their children what steps they're taking now to be sure they're strong and healthy when they grow up.

Appendix A: Signs of Neglect and Abuse

A number of indicators can help identify instances of neglect or abuse. Familiarity with these signs can help you make appropriate interventions in cases of known or suspected neglect or abuse.

Sometimes an instance of abuse is witnessed directly. In most instances, however, teachers and others who care for children must respond to less certain information, making inferences from physical and behavioral signs.

Seeing these signs in a student certainly suggests a need to gather more information. When injuries or signs are severe or persistent, or several different indicators are present, “reasonable suspicion” may be raised. Speak with a consultant in your school, the mandated reporter in your system, or local Child Protective Services to evaluate whether a report is required or recommended, or if other intervention is called for.

Reports should not be made based on behavioral indicators alone, since there may be many causes for these.

Physical Abuse

Defined

The physical injury of a child inflicted by a parent or other caregiver, other adults, older children or peers. In your state, legal definitions might require that the person inflicting the abuse be 18 or over for mandatory reporting guidelines. Intervention is called for any time a child is being injured in this way, however, no matter how old the perpetrator is.

Physical Signs

- ◆ Bruises, welts or bite marks on any part of the body, especially face, neck, wrists, ankles, torso, back, buttocks or thighs.
- ◆ Lacerations or abrasions on any part of the body, especially to mouth, eyes, genitalia, arms, legs or torso.
- ◆ Burns on any part of the body, especially soles of feet, palms, back or buttocks; or signs of scalding water immersion (sock-like or glove-like burns).
- ◆ Injuries to both sides of the face. (Unintentional injuries, such as falls, usually injure only one side.)
- ◆ Marks in the shape of an article such as a belt, cord, kitchen utensil or iron.
- ◆ Continual presence of injuries in various states of healing.
- ◆ Marks appearing regularly after weekends, vacations or absences.

Behavioral Signs

- ◆ Wearing long sleeves or other concealing clothing inappropriate for weather.
- ◆ Apprehensive around adults; hyper-alert around crying children; unusually uncomfortable with changes in routines.
- ◆ Avoids going home.
- ◆ Behavior more exaggerated than that of peers (more aggressive, more withdrawn, mood changes).
- ◆ Low self-esteem.
- ◆ Injures self; prone to accidents; suicide attempts.

Sexual Abuse

Defined

The sexual exploitation of a child by a parent, relative, other caregiver, other adult, older child or peer. This includes a range of possible behaviors, including exhibitionism, voyeurism, showing the child pornographic materials, photographing the child for pornography, touching, fondling, or any form of sexual intercourse.

Physical Signs

- ◆ Often hard to see in school settings (teachers don't usually see genitals and underclothing).
- ◆ Showing pain or discomfort in walking or sitting.
- ◆ Torn, stained or bloody underclothing.
- ◆ Pain, itching or irritation in genital area.
- ◆ Bruises, abrasions or bleeding in genital area.
- ◆ Bruises or abrasions in mouth.
- ◆ Sexually transmitted diseases.
- ◆ Pain during urination; urinary tract infections.

Behavioral Signs

- ◆ Poor peer relationships.
- ◆ Sexualized behavior, acting out or sexual aggression among peers.
- ◆ Does not want to change for gym; avoids P.E. activities.
- ◆ Extreme fear or dislike of being touched.
- ◆ Withdrawal; regressive behaviors; fantasy.
- ◆ Reports sexual abuse by caregivers or others.
- ◆ Low self-esteem.
- ◆ Injures self; prone to accidents; suicide attempts.

Neglect

Defined

Adult caregivers withhold or fail to provide a child's basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, supervision, education, hygiene or medical care. Emotional neglect includes acting in a way (either by omission or commission) that seriously impairs the emotional and mental development and functioning of a child.

Examples include unusual confinements (tying children down, locking them in closets for long periods), abusive language that denigrates the child, or withholding physical contact and affection to a severe extent. Such actions may be the result of a caregiver's alcohol or other drug abuse, mental illness or general personality traits.

Physical Signs

- ♦ Physical or mental development slow, behind peers.
- ♦ Appears at school hungry, poorly groomed, inappropriately dressed.
- ♦ Medical needs are not attended to.
- ♦ Speech problems.

Behavioral Signs

- ♦ Frequently truant.
- ♦ Begging or stealing food.
- ♦ Unusual habits (rocking, biting, sucking).
- ♦ Poor peer relationships; overly aggressive or withdrawn.
- ♦ Consistently describes long periods of unsupervised time, especially in dangerous situations.
- ♦ Avoids or delays going home.
- ♦ Extremes in behavior (very adult-like, very infantile, very emotional).
- ♦ Reports that there is no caregiver available.

Appendix B: Curriculum Integration

Here are some ways teaching about healthy, whole-person sexuality can be integrated across the curriculum. None of these topics needs to specifically address sexuality, but each teaches children things related to the whole-person experience.

Although this is by no means a comprehensive list, it may identify ways you are already teaching in this area, as well as suggest ideas for enhancing positive messages about sexuality for your students.

Subject	Lessons Thematically Related to Sexuality Education
Social Studies/ History	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Families in different cultures and times.2. The role of children in different cultures and times.3. The roles of men and women in different cultures and times.4. Cultural diversity.
Math	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Count numbers of people in individual students' families, then add up the combined number of people in all the families.2. Add up the ages of family members. Compare age ranges in different students' families.3. Learn about chance and risk.4. Take opinion surveys and analyze the results mathematically (e.g., about family roles and responsibilities).

Subject	Lessons Thematically Related to Sexuality Education
Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read and discuss stories about diversity and differences, families, or challenging sex-role stereotypes.2. Teach communication skills and refusal skills.3. Examine messages in advertising and other media.4. Write stories about personal plans for the future.
Science	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Growing, changing bodies; how bodies work.2. Growing, changing families.3. Similarities and differences (among plants, foods, people, boys and girls, adults and children, animals, etc.).4. How the senses work.
Community Involvement	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Visit a newborn nursery or a preschool.2. Invite guest speakers who can talk about families, babies, roles of children in different cultures (e.g., nurse, parent who has a newborn, parents who come from different cultures).3. Have students tutor or teach younger students.4. Share positive health messages with others through writing, posters, wearing badges, making statements in class, or creating public service messages.

Resources

Child Development

Fraiberg, S. 1996. *The Magic Years: Understanding and Handling the Problems of Early Childhood*. New York: Fireside.

Child development classic describes the way young children perceive the world. The “magic years” are the time when magical thinking is the device children use to answer questions and manage new information.

Kivel, P. 1999. *Boys Will Be Men: Raising Our Sons for Courage, Caring and Community*. Gabriola Island, B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers.

Talks about helping boys deal with the difficult forces in their lives, including sexism, violence, racism, drugs and homophobia. Describes ways to create alliances with boys, and how to help them become allies of themselves and one another.

Wood, C. 1997. *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14: A Resource for Parents and Teachers*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

Reference for teachers provides a developmental perspective on children in different grades. Covers learning styles, social skills, physical and cognitive capabilities in a succinct and easy-to-use format.

Sexuality and Sexuality Education

Bernstein, A. 1994. *The Flight of the Stork: What Children Think (and When) About Sex and Family Building*. Indianapolis: Perspectives Press.

Readable research about children's developmental understandings of sexuality and reproduction. Includes new material on adoption, stepfamilies and new reproductive technologies.

De Freitas, C. 1998. *Keys to Your Child's Healthy Sexuality*. New York: Barron's.

Part of a series of parenting guides published by Barron's offers a positive approach to sexuality, lots of information, and suggestions on how to talk about different subjects with children and teens. Focuses on parent-child interactions, but information would be useful for teachers as well.

Drolet, J. C., and K. Clark, eds. 1994. *The Sexuality Education Challenge: Promoting Healthy Sexuality in Young People*. Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates.

Chapters by some of the nation's top sexuality educators and a resource about many different aspects of sexuality education. Includes chapters on teaching sexuality in the early elementary grades, sexuality education in conservative communities, the role of religious organizations, and many other topics.

Early Childhood Sexuality Education Task Force. 1995. *Right from the Start: Guidelines for Sexuality Issues: Birth to Five Years*. New York: SIECUS.

Thoughtful guidelines for childcare centers and preschools.

Haffner, D. 1999. *From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children*. New York: Newmarket Press.

Will be interesting to teachers as well as parents. Written in an informative, easy style with lots of anecdotes to help make the points clearer.

National Guidelines Task Force. 1996. *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education*. 2d ed. New York: SIECUS.

The most widely recognized and implemented framework for comprehensive sexuality education in the United States. Useful for putting together a program, evaluating a program, teacher training and parent education. The task force is composed of some of the most respected leaders in the field of sexuality education. Highly recommended.

Self-Esteem

Berne, P., and L. Savary. 1996. *Building Self-Esteem in Children*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.

Narrative book describes the dynamics of healthy self-esteem. Provides pragmatic suggestions for ways to encourage and enhance self-esteem in children. Focuses on ideas for parents, but is useful for teachers and others who work with children as well.

Borba, M. 1989. *Esteem Builders: A K-8 Self-Esteem Curriculum for Improving Student Achievement, Behavior and School Climate*. Torrance, CA: Jalmar Press.

A collection of over 250 activities addressing 5 essential elements of successful self-esteem. Appropriately tailored to students by age levels, based on self-esteem research.

Canfield, J., and H. C. Wells. 1994. *100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Fun, easy-to-do activities that build self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Some take only moments; others are more in-depth.

Khalsa, S. 1996. *Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem*. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.

Good ideas and activities. Many involve worksheets and writing better suited to older students, but some can be adapted for younger children.

Resources

Seligman, M. 1996. *The Optimistic Child: A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Written for teachers and parents, reviews Seligman's long-term research on what makes children resilient. Provides clear, research-based rationales for the useful recommendations and suggestions.

Community

Bukowski, W. M., A. F. Newcomb and W. W. Hartup, eds. 1998. *The Company They Keep: Friendship in Childhood and Adolescence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Anthology of somewhat scholarly articles about the benefits and mechanisms of children's friendships.

Quiroz, H. C. 1996. *Start with the Kids: 5 Days to Building a Classroom Community*. Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates.

Practical and creative strategies to give students a sense of belonging and responsibility.

Books for Children

Cole, J. 1994. *How You Were Born*. New York: Mulberry Books.

Photos and diagrams tell the story of fetal development. Cell division and fertilization are described without explaining sexual intercourse. The language is too sophisticated for very young children, but the content is presented in a loving context, with lots of images and topics of interest to children. Photos include people of many ethnicities.

Gordon, S., and J. Gordon. 1992. *Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?* New York: Prometheus Books.

Book for young children describes sexual intercourse, fetal development and childbirth in the context of a larger discussion about

family, relatives, love and belonging. Pictures families of different ethnicities.

Harris, R., and M. Emberley (illus.). 1996. *It's Perfectly Normal: A Book About Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Lots of humor, fun comics, good information and reassurance. Includes illustrations of people naked and clothed, and of many different body types. Promotes healthy attitudes about the physical and emotional changes of puberty. Reading level is fairly advanced, but illustrations and cartoons are very informative on their own. Appropriate for pre-teens approaching puberty. Illustrations include people of different ethnicities.

Harris, R., and M. Emberley (illus.). 1996. *Happy Birth Day!* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Beautifully illustrated tale of a child's first day, from birth, to breastfeeding, visits from relatives, and sleep. Good resource for younger children. Pictures an Anglo child and family.

Harris, R., and M. Emberley (illus.). 1999. *It's So Amazing: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Charming illustrations, reassuring humor and a straightforward approach to information about conception and birth. Includes a double-page illustration of a growing baby pictured actual size, from 1 month to 9 months. Younger children will enjoy the pictures, but the reading level is better matched to children around age 9 or 10. Illustrations include people of different ethnicities.

Mayle, P., and A. Robins (illus.). 1999. *Where Did I Come From?* Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group.

A classic first published in 1977. Humorous drawings and friendly language explain physical differences between men and women, sexual intercourse, conception and fetal development. Uses Anglo subjects.

Resources

Nilsson, L., and L. Swanberg. 1994. *How Was I Born?* New York: Delacorte Press.

Tells the story of Mary and her family over the period of time that her mother is pregnant with her baby brother, Thomas. Features beautiful photos of developing fetuses, engaging photos of the family, and thoughtful juxtapositions (Mary drinks through a straw, the baby is nurtured through the umbilical cord). Language is sometimes a bit sophisticated, but children will find the pictures and content engaging. Pictures an Anglo child and family.

Websites

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network

www.glsen.org

An organization that promotes accuracy in education about gay and lesbian issues. Offers guidelines for school administrators and other educators, current news reports, teaching resources emphasizing bias-free teaching, lesson plans.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

www.pflag.org

PFLAG is a national organization of parents and family members of gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgendered people. They have a special program called “Safe Schools” that works to prevent violence and harassment of sexual minorities in schools.

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

www.siecus.org

SIECUS is a national, nonprofit organization which affirms that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. SIECUS develops, collects and disseminates information and promotes comprehensive sexuality education. A premier resource for information about current trends and research in sexuality education,

guidelines for classroom education, information about faith communities and sexuality, and suggestions for parents.

Talking with Kids About Tough Issues

www.talkingwithkids.org

A national initiative by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation to encourage parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol and drug abuse. Includes suggestions for parents and background information.

Hotlines

CDC National STD Hotline

8 a.m. - 11 p.m. M-F (EST)
800-227-8922

National AIDS Hotline

24 hours
English: 800-342-AIDS
Spanish: 800-344-7432
TTY: 800-243-7889

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About the Authors

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Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES, is a licensed marriage and family therapist who has published numerous books and articles on child, adolescent and family health. She has presented at trainings and conferences around the country, speaking to teachers, mental health providers and others in the health care field about ways to support healthy choices among students and patients. As a social worker for 12 years with the University of California, San Francisco, she worked in a program specializing in HIV and mental health. She is currently a Patient Education Specialist at ETR Associates.

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