

PARENTS
AND
SEX EDUCATION

For Parents of Young Children

BY
B. C. GRUENBERG



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AND SEX EDUCATION

For Parents of Young Children

BY THE SAME AUTHOR



High Schools and Sex Education

Outlines of Child Study
A Manual for Parents and Teachers

Guidance of Childhood and Youth

Elementary Biology

Biology and Human Life

The Story of Evolution

Foreword to the Third Edition

Children wonder. They ask questions. Some of these questions embarrass parents, for various reasons. Parents wonder. They ask for help. "What shall I do when my child asks . . . ?"

For a generation at least parents have been reaching out for help: "What words shall I use, and in what order shall I utter them?" The parents have been offered hundreds of books and pamphlets containing the appropriate words, arranged in suitable order. Many of the parents seem to be satisfied.

When *Parents and Sex Education* was first published some nine years ago, the writer and those associated with him felt that there must be parents who want something more than a set of words, something that would enable them to use their own words, something that would help to free them from those embarrassments and confusions which trouble them—and their children.

It is gratifying that parents and educators have found this book helpful in such ways. It is a pleasure to acknowledge suggestions received for this revision, from those who have used the book, especially from members of the staff of the Child Study Association of America and of the staff of the American Social Hygiene Association, under whose auspices the book was originally written.

B. C. G.

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Parents and Sex Education

I

Why Education and Guidance with Respect to Sex Matters Are Necessary

I THE SITUATION OF THE YOUNG CHILD

Generally speaking, the very young child has no need for information regarding sex or reproduction, and only in exceptional cases does he need special help in the formation of wholesome habits related to sex. His daily life, that is to say, has no direct concern with sexual matters of a kind in which special knowledge would be of help. Nevertheless, there are two considerations which make it highly desirable that the child should be early and wisely introduced to the elementary facts and ideas by those with whom he is most intimate at home.

In the first place, the knowledge regarding sex and reproduction which the child eventually receives will be permanently colored in his mind by the manner and the circumstances of his first impressions. It is therefore desirable that his first impressions be associated with the love of parents, with having his curiosity satisfied in a sympathetic atmosphere, and with coming to understand his body and its functions as perfectly normal parts of the world of life. He should be introduced to the subject while it can be ap-

proached without secrecy, without suspicion, without prejudice. The finding out about reproduction, like the finding out about other facts of life, should be a continuous process of adding little by little and making it his own. The early instruction is necessary as part of this continuous process, laying the foundations for and giving promise of what is to come later.

In the second place, we are in a sense quite without choice in the matter. Unless a child is completely isolated from contact with other persons, or unless a child is decidedly subnormal in his mental powers, sex information and suggestion are sure to come to him from a variety of sources. It is impossible to keep him altogether ignorant. We can hope, at the best, to anticipate information and suggestions from unwholesome sources by establishing early an attitude of confidence in the information he receives at home, and in the parents as sources of further knowledge when he should want it.

Aside from these considerations, one positive and the other negative, there are further reasons why it is desirable for the parents to assume early the guidance of the child in matters pertaining to sex. There is the fact that the young child is much more easily taught than the older child, and that the child who has not had good instruction early is very difficult to reach later. He has no prejudices to stand in the way of accepting what is told him in good faith. He has no preconceptions to oppose to the teaching, and his views have not yet been colored. Indeed, it is precisely because the child is so open to new impressions that neglect here usually means the establishment of ideas and attitudes that need later to

be eradicated, and that in many cases bias the whole mental and moral development of the child, to his detriment.

There is the further fact that there gradually arises out of his normal experiences a certain entirely justified curiosity regarding the origin of babies, and regarding the more obvious differences between the sexes. And this curiosity must be satisfied in one way or another. If it is adequately met by the parents, it will be dismissed, to reappear later when new observations and experiences call for an expansion or elaboration of the elementary knowledge. If it is not satisfied, or if the child receives one set of answers from his parents and a conflicting set from other sources, the curiosity will continue to annoy the child. And in many cases this conflict will result in a growing estrangement between parent and child that makes increasingly difficult any further help that the parent may be disposed to render. Indeed, this estrangement may arise from such a conflict even where the parents are altogether frank and truthful. The fantastic tales of his playmates may be more interesting than the matter-of-fact stories of the parents, and it may take the child some time to learn that the parents are in every way more trustworthy than the others.

In order to take advantage of the fact that instruction is easiest during the earlier years, in order to furnish the child the satisfactions of a legitimate curiosity which cannot be safely ignored, and in order to keep open the channel of confidence and communication between the parents and child, guidance should begin with the earliest years.

II THE NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS

The failure on the part of adults to attain satisfactory use and control of sex is paralleled and, in part, caused by the difficulties and unsolved problems of adolescence and youth. Much of the delinquency with which courts and police have to deal results from untrained and unguided impulses connected with sex, even in cases that have no apparent relation to sex matters—as, for example, stealing. The large amount and steady increase of illegitimacy and widespread promiscuity in sexual relations, quite apart from prostitution, indicates that young people have not acquired the knowledge, ideals, and skill necessary for managing their affairs to the best advantage. The morbid curiosity as well as the worries and fears concerning sex, prevalent among young people and often standing in the way of marriage, and the large amount of serious sex repression and of perversion, point equally to the shortcomings in our training of youth.

The conditions we find among adults and among youth challenge us to ask: (1) whether those who understand should continue to ignore or treat with a combination of levity and evasion the whole problem of sex; and (2) whether the necessary education and training should not begin much earlier in life than the period at which the individual becomes conscious of sex impulses and sex problems, the period at which difficulties are already manifest.

III THE RESULTS IN ADULT LIFE OF EARLY NEGLECT OR MISGUIDANCE

We develop plans for avoiding troubles of all kinds only after we have experienced, or at least witnessed, suffering and disaster that might have been avoided. It is through generations of physical, spiritual, and social agony and calamity that we have at last come to ask ourselves what we may do today to prevent the repetition of similar miseries tomorrow.

For many years it has become increasingly evident that with vast numbers of men and women the sex life is far from wholesome. In this country the ratio of divorces to marriages has doubled in less than thirty years. The failure of so many marriages, one out of every six or seven ending in divorce, and many of the others simply hiding their failure, indicates at least that young people have not been adequately prepared for married life or for the selection of a mate. Another lack in the education of youth is indicated by the fact that so many of the men and women one meets every day have one or another extreme attitude toward sex—that is, some are over-delicate, regarding the whole subject as beastly, vile, or indecent; while others are actually beastly, and wallow in sex. Finally, a lack of suitable guidance and training is shown by the large amount of sexual perversion, by the large amount of nervous disorder due to certain types of anxieties and worries, by the wide extent and far-reaching influence of prostitution, and by the wide distribution of the venereal diseases, with all of their by-products of blindness, sterility, insanity, paralysis, and defectiveness.

II

What Should Be the Attitude of the Parent?

Most adults of the present generation in this country are suffering from the effects of certain customs and traditions of the past, which have brought about various hostile or perverse attitudes toward sex. In what we sometimes call the "vulgar" attitude, sex is looked upon as an object of obscene jest, or as something shameful which is flaunted in defiance of convention. On the other hand, much of the attitude which considers itself quite respectable is merely an inversion of the vulgar attitude, a self-conscious and over-emphatic denial of interests it fears to acknowledge. Both of these attitudes are equally unwholesome, from the viewpoint of the individual as well as from that of society. The prudish attitude, resulting from constraint and repression of feelings, is afraid of sex and of all of its manifestations. It tends to concealment and denial, and often to hypocrisy. It is as unwholesome as ribaldry, though in a different way.

It is easy to see how prurience and vulgarity tend to defile and degrade these high values which, by a progressive mastery of primitive impulses, the race has evolved after centuries of struggle and effort. It is not generally recognized, however, that prudery tends to destroy the creative impulses, to restrain the imagination as an agent of constructive effort in the arts and sciences, as well as to restrain the appreciation

and enjoyment of beauty in all forms. In typical cases prudery is suspicious of all impulses that lead to pleasure, and it is suspicious of all manifestations of pleasure. Joy and laughter suggest to it at least the possibility of something improper. Because the native desires do so often lead to wrongdoing and disaster, repressed persons are prone to ascribe wickedness to all natural impulses and to demand their repression everywhere. In this way an unwholesome attitude is perpetuated by denying life to the very spirit. In extreme cases the destruction is a physical one as well as a spiritual one, in that it may lead to actual sterility or impotence.

Therefore, the first need of the parent who means to deal constructively and helpfully with the sex education of the child is to free himself as completely as may be of the hampering fears and inhibitions derived from his own earliest experience, or imposed by past generations. This requires a great deal more than the acceptance of the new science, or an acknowledgment of responsibility, or an affirmation of desire to do what is right and needful for the child. It requires a re-education. It will mean in many cases a prolonged and determined effort to attain a totally new point of view and to reverse the feelings acquired during many years. *Unless we do actually accept the facts of sex as normal and decent, unless we do ourselves look upon reproduction and all that goes with it as clean and fine and capable of enlarging the meanings and satisfactions of life, we can hardly hope to impress upon our children a wholesome and satisfying attitude.*

Questions that the child may ask must be met with perfect sincerity. We cannot do justice to the child while we cling

to any secrets or entertain any fears or doubts. We must recognize that whatever unwholesome associations sex may have carried for us in the past, the approach of the child is always innocent and genuine. The very fact that a child is asking a question usually indicates that he has no hind-thought; and our response must be in the same sincere spirit.

We must further be on our guard against giving the child the impression that certain of his questions are somehow less proper than others, that some topics or problems may be freely discussed, while others belong in a special class, calling for a totally different mode of treatment. We must enter into the spirit of the child and answer his questions or give him the explanations he wants in complete sympathy with his limitations and needs. It is only by maintaining constantly this friendly and sympathetic attitude that we can hope to maintain his continued confidence. He will not for long resort to his parents for help unless his appeals bring satisfaction.

It follows from the foregoing considerations that neither in our manner nor in our tone of voice should our treatment of matters pertaining to reproduction and sex be so differentiated from our treatment of other topics as to implant in the child the feeling that these things are somehow in a class apart. Matters of fact should be stated in a matter-of-fact manner. Additional information or explanations may be given in a thoroughly casual and objective way. There is no occasion for a whisper, for twilight, or for sentimentalism, any more than in the teaching of table manners or geography. Any genuine sentiment that the parent may feel, any earnestness derived from sincere conviction on the subject,