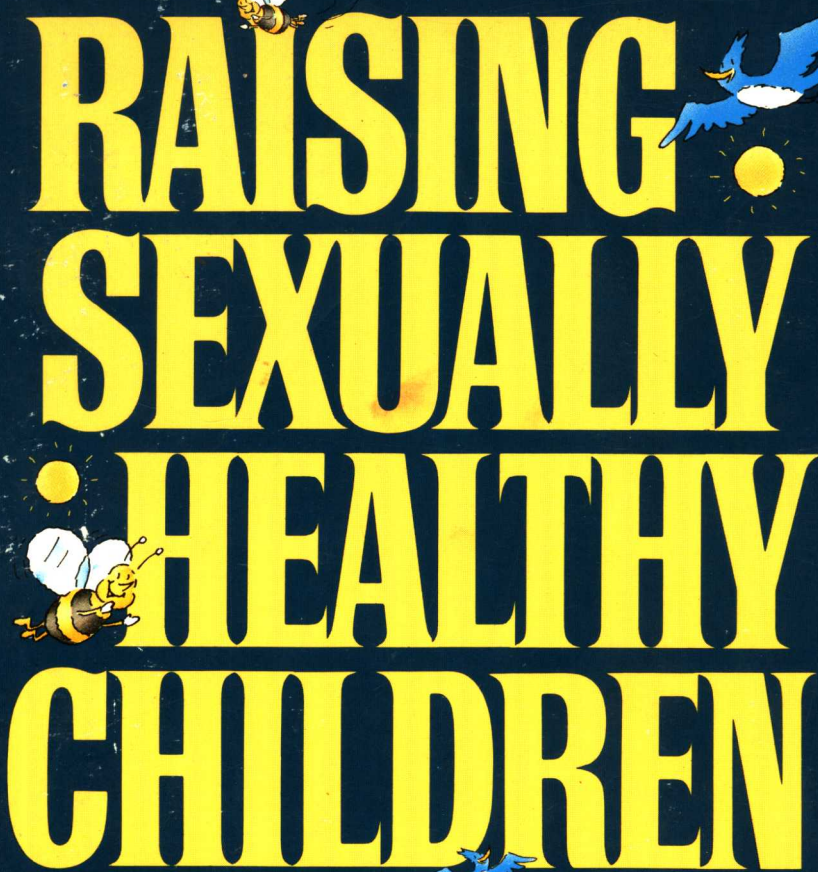


"An excellent aid in handling children's sexually related questions and actions" Jane Brody, *The New York Times*

# RAISING SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

The title is set against a dark blue background. There are two cartoon bees: one at the top left of the word 'RAISING' and one to the left of the word 'HEALTHY'. There are also two cartoon birds: one at the top right of the word 'RAISING' and one at the bottom right of the word 'CHILDREN'. Small yellow sun-like circles are also present near the bees and birds.

A LOVING GUIDE FOR PARENTS,  
TEACHERS AND CARE-GIVERS

**LYNN LEIGHT, R.N.**

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SEX, HEALTH, EDUCATION (S.H.E.) CENTERS

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AVON BC

# **RAISING SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN**

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**A LOVING GUIDE FOR PARENTS,  
TEACHERS AND CARE-GIVERS**

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**LYNN LEIGHT, R.N.**

**AVON BOOKS  NEW YORK**

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The Hearst Corporation  
1350 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, New York 10019

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Published by arrangement with Rawson Associates  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-42794  
ISBN: 0-380-70857-4

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First Avon Books Trade Printing: May 1990

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Printed in the U.S.A.

OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

**My lover, my best friend, my shield and my sword,  
my husband**

**My loves, my heartstrings, my most challenging blessings,  
my children**

**My nurturers, my role models, my shepherds of spirituality,  
my parents**

**This book is not intended to replace consultations with or treatment by appropriate professionals. The reader should regularly consult a physician or other health professional in matters relating to his or her child's health and particularly in respect of any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.**

**The names, circumstances, and other identifying characteristics of individuals in case histories have been changed to protect their privacy.**

## *Foreword*

Raising sexually healthy children is the challenge of the 1980s. Everyone wants his or her child to be sexually healthy, but few of us know when and where to begin.

Whether they do it well or badly, parents are the principal sex educators of their children—so they might as well do it well. Silence and evasiveness teach children as persuasively as direct and honest communication. Parents need to appreciate that knowledge is not harmful, but that ignorance and unresolved curiosity *are*. If you are an “askable” parent, your child will begin to ask questions at age three or four or five. Answer them! Tell children a little more than you think they want to know or can understand, thus assuring a perfectly adequate response. (Besides, it’s good for children to be exposed to an occasional word they don’t quite understand. They’ll grow up with an excellent vocabulary.) And relax.

Relax? Easier said than done, you say. You are not comfortable. Let me respond with the confidence of a sex educator who has studied and lectured in this field for more than 35 years. No one is comfortable about his or her sexuality any more (if ever anyone was). No one? Well, almost no one. Join most of us who are not comfortable, but who are endeavoring to become more comfortable. Start by telling your child that you are not comfortable, and your child will reassure you. Then read Lynn Leight’s wonderful, warm, compassionate book to better understand your own sexual endow-

ment. This is your unique, family-inspired "golden opportunity" to rehearse the best ways of communicating with your child about anxiety-provoking situations, such as nudity, toilet training, wet dreams, masturbation, and homosexuality. It is the most *au courant* update on teaching your children about safe sex, AIDS, and other vital issues, along with everyday opportunities for discussing sexual health with young people of all ages—toddler to teen.

It's all here—no critical sexual issue is left out. No question remains unanswered. And it's all explained with warmth, deftness, sensitivity, and boldness. When Lynn Leight writes, "A child's sexuality is affirmed or denied at every touch," you feel it deeply, and you know it is true.

Lynn Leight's book presents the alternative we need. When Lynn Leight reveals how a mother calmly handles the "hot" issue of finding her preschooler playing doctor, you laugh and learn by example. When Lynn discloses the secrets shared by a group of eleven-year-olds, you become keenly aware of the sexual curiosity of preadolescents. And when Lynn shares practical resolutions for teens in search of sexual autonomy, you grow wiser and more confident in your role as your child's sexuality educator.

The book is a refreshing view of sexuality with a focus on responsibility, common sense, and spirituality, all in the context of a celebration of family life. A special gift of the book is its final chapter, in which you have a chance to test your new-found information. Dozens of questions and answers provide a treasury of responses to children's most frequently expressed concerns as they mature.

This is the book you wish your parents had read when you were growing up. This is a book you'll share with your friends, your child's grandparents, and one to which you'll refer again and again as your child grows into young adulthood.

Bravo, Lynn Leight!

Sol Gordon, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University

author of *Raising Your Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World; When Living Hurts*

## *Acknowledgments*

Four years ago when my dear friend and mentor, Dr. Sol Gordon, advocated that I write a book, a serendipitous chain of events occurred. As if ordained by a higher force, special people and "Golden Opportunities" appeared at strategic intervals to provide guidance and encouragement.

The mission of love began when my secretary, Edith Whittle, typed an abstract on sexuality for a professional journal and enthusiastically proclaimed that I had written the first draft of "The Book." Her influence was so empowering that she infused me with the confidence to submit it to colleagues for comments and review. And so it was Edith's unrelenting faith in the merit of the manuscript and her magical ability to transform hundreds of pencil-scrawled pages into legibly typed print that transformed the dream into a reality.

From the beginning, Judith and Sol Gordon's interest, encouragement, and wise counsel never faltered and will always be appreciated. Dr. Mary Calderone's wisdom and constructive criticism became an influence for which I am greatly indebted. Carol Cassell's delicate and thoughtful review of the original copy and Kathy Everly's technical advice were graciously extended and gratefully embraced. To Judy Rothman (my guardian angel of the publishing world), I offer my deepest gratitude for directing me to Denise Marcil, a literary agent with pluck, judicious intelligence, and a sense of spirituality. Denise helped me choose a fitting and proper publisher with the skill of a professional matchmaker. The reward for such a discriminating selection is an editor such as Toni Sciarra, for whom I have an abiding fondness and deep respect as a consummate professional and a masterful and compassionate practitioner of the written word.

The gossamer thread of serendipity connected me with people too numerous to mention (you know who you are). You will always be lovingly remembered for your direct and indirect contribution in encouraging the completion of this book—persons such as Jody Kay, who proved that an illustration is worth a thousand words, and Jeanne DeQuine, who taught me the nuances of preparing a polished book proposal and techniques for surviving the discipline and pain of editorial revisions. Dear friends who provided emotional and physical sustenance during my self-imposed days in writing exile. Pathfinders of sexual health such as Sid Simon, Michael Carrera, Virginia Satir, Bill Masters, and Virginia Johnson, inspired my perspective of sexuality. Social scientists like Ashley Montague and Norman Cousins, and physicians such as Steve Allen, Jr., and Marty Weisberg who reaffirmed my belief that laughter and humor are the most powerful sources of healing and sexual learning. And my dear, deceased friend, Joan Levy, who was my most ardent cheerleader and loyal supporter. To all who have cared and shared your knowledge and talents and to the countless students, clients, and SHE Center staff who have allowed me to convey their stories . . . thank you. For in truth this book is not *my* book. This book belongs to all of us.

Above all, I wish to take this opportunity to publicly declare my appreciation to my darling husband, my children, and my mother, who have unselfishly encouraged me to complete this project despite the all-night writing vigils, the weeks of isolation, and the months of personal commitment. Certainly my most cherished and sensitive receptors of serendipity have been my family. With their love, support, and incomparable humor, I now know that I can accomplish anything.

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## *The How-to of Raising Sexually Healthy Children*

The sun is just rising on Saturday morning as Stan rolls over in bed to caress his bride of five years. Joanne joyfully responds to Stan's touch. Their bodies are warm and relaxed. The house is peacefully quiet. Stan helps Joanne slip out of her nightgown. Joanne removes Stan's shorts. Stan begins to slide his mouth to Joanne's breasts when he spies—from the corner of his eye—Brian, their four-year-old son, standing transfixed in the doorway.

Stan freezes. His firm erection disappears in a matter of seconds. He rolls off Joanne, controls his anxiety, and greets Brian with a cheery, "Morning, Pal, how you doing today?" With this Joanne gasps and shrills at Brian, "What are you doing out of bed? Go back to bed, *now!* It's too early to be roaming around the house." Brian is in tears as he runs back to his room.

Back in his room, Brian is frightened and confused. He wonders, "What were Mommy and Daddy doing? Why is Mommy so angry? If I'm a bad boy, how come Daddy isn't mad, too?"

This bittersweet incident was the focus of a sexuality seminar I recently conducted. During the past 25 years, I have heard similar scenarios revealed countless times.

One of the greatest joys of conducting sexuality seminars is observing the relief of seminar participants as they discover that they are not alone.

Joanne and Stan's experience opens the door to myriad sexual dilemmas that have afflicted parents for generations: "Once the baby arrives, how can we resume our carefree lovemaking style?" "What

happens if our kids catch us 'doing it'?" "If we worry about sexuality now, when our children are only babies, what are we going to do when they are teenagers?" "How can we raise sexually healthy children when we are feeling so confused and guarded and uncomfortable?"

Parents often tell me that they have prepared themselves for childbirth and childrearing on every level *except* for issues related to sexuality. Before attending my seminars on sexuality, many of these parents shunned the subject of sex even between themselves. Too embarrassed to bring up the subject with friends and family, they often feel that everyone else is "adjusting," and that their confusion is a sign of ignorance or sexual inadequacy.

In the safety of the group, each member appears to have a suggestion for Joanne and Stan. I encourage their support. I also remind them that it is always easier to recognize a solution when not actively confronted with a dilemma. In the words of my dear friend and sexuality expert, Dr. Sol Gordon, I caution that "It is easy to be a hero in someone else's shoes."

Some parents keep the bedroom door locked during moments of passion. Some maintain that this isn't always possible, especially if the sexual encounter is spontaneous. Others state that they have never fully enjoyed sex at home since they have had children, knowing that the children are in the next room or down the hall. Some plan their lovemaking when the children are visiting a relative—or they go to a motel and leave the children with a baby-sitter. A very few parents declare that sexual intimacy is a natural expression of deep affection, and that the earlier a child is taught to appreciate this God-given gift, the better adjusted the child will be in the future.

## **DON'T MISS THE GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES!**

Isn't it a shame that our sophisticated society takes a closed-door approach to such a life-enhancing activity? When pioneers lived in one- and two-room cabins, how were they able to produce such large families without "corrupting" the minds of the children who shared their dwellings? Not that I'm advocating that parents copulate in

front of their children (as is done in some societies today), but I doubt that a child will be irrevocably traumatized if he or she suddenly appears during a passionate interlude.

I would classify the situation described earlier *not* as an embarrassment, but as a "Golden Opportunity." Golden Opportunities are the ordinary and extraordinary everyday encounters that can be transformed into spontaneous sexuality learning experiences. Sometimes the opportunity is subtle, like a mother bird teaching her young to fly. Sometimes it is blatant, like a used condom washed ashore in a bed of sea shells. The world abounds with Golden Opportunities. The trick is to grasp the moment as it occurs and address it as nonchalantly as you would any everyday event.

This concept may seem foreign to you if you were brought up with the notion that sexuality education consists of strategically executed "discussions." These discussions usually followed a "crisis": two kindergarteners caught playing doctor, a child found exploring the baby's genitals, or a preteen arriving home late from a date, with her clothes suspiciously wrinkled. Often "the discussion" was a one-time pow-wow reserved for the onset of puberty.

Golden Opportunities, in contrast, are *not* contrived. They occur at every age and stage of maturation. Within this book, readers will find a treasure trove of Golden Opportunities just waiting to be uncovered. It is this promise of a new, innovative approach to sexuality education that motivates me to write this book.

For years I have helped parents who want to assume their role as their child's primary sexuality teacher, but who don't know how to begin. They fear that they will misinform or, worse, somehow damage their child's sexual health. These parents ask questions like, "When is the right time to talk about sex?" "What happens if I give too much information?" "What if I don't know the answer?" "What if my child doesn't ask?"

Parents are usually surprised when I assure them that *they have been "talking sex" with their child since his or her birth*. Sex talk isn't just about a penis and a vagina. It deals with *every aspect* of life that defines you as a person. Once you embrace this concept, you will recognize that the simple act of washing your child's hair provides a Golden Opportunity to talk about sex.

\*\*\* "I love the soft touch of your hair. This shampoo smells so good and helps your hair shine like golden silk. Did you know that when you were born you had fuzzy brown hair? Daddy and I didn't know that all babies grow new hair after they are born and that it is often different from a baby's first hair. Hair grows on all different parts of the body. When you were born, your body was covered with a soft, downy hair, but it disappeared after a week or so. I guess it shed just like kitty's hair sheds. As you grow older, new hair will grow on your body. Just like Mommy and Daddy, hair will grow on your arms and legs and under your arms and even on your vulva.

Your child may inquire, "What is a vulva?" You might reply, "The vulva is the name that we call all the private parts that girls and women can see and touch between their legs." (You may add, "Like the lips of your vagina, clitoris, and the opening through which you urinate.") "The hair on the vulva looks and feels different from your long, silky hair. Now, feel the hair on your arms and then feel the hair on my arms. See the bristly hair growing under my arms? Do you want to feel it? Isn't the body amazing? It's so much fun to talk about how it works and feels and smells. Hmm, I love the smell of your hair."

Now, wasn't that easy! And it really *is* fun when you tune into the world of wonderment. The prospects are endless. The Golden Opportunity approach has been used successfully by hundreds of parents who have attended my seminars. It has been trial-tested.

If Joanne and Stan had been tuned into Golden Opportunities, their response to four-year-old Brian might have been:

\*\*\* "Oops," says either parent, "you caught us off guard. We didn't expect company. Mommy and Daddy are kind of playing with each other. I guess you can call it sex-play. It's what grown-ups do when they want to show how much they love one another. It's a special, private time we usually have together when the door to our bedroom is closed. In the future when our bedroom door is closed, you will know that