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# Sexuality education of young children: Parental concerns

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Transmission of values and attitudes about sexuality from parents to children is inevitable; values and attitudes are transmitted whether parents choose to actively participate in the sexuality education of their children or are neglectful in the matter (Allen & Baber, 1992; Calderone, 1989; Goldman & Goldman, 1982; Klein & Gordon, 1992). The purpose of this article is to identify parental concerns about sexuality education that may contribute to parents' neglect of the topic of sexuality or make it difficult for them to take a proactive role in the sexuality education of their young children.

## Research on Sexuality Education by Parents

Over the past two decades, researchers, recognizing the impact of the family on a child's developing sexuality and future behavior, have addressed the issue of sexuality education by parents. Most of this research has focused on school-aged children and their parents (e.g., Baldwin & Baronoski, 1990; Brown, 1989; Bundy & White, 1990; Huston, Martin, & Foulds, 1990; Kirby, 1985). Only a few recent studies have addressed the issue of parents as sexuality educators of young (preschool) children (Alter & Wilson, 1982; Davis, Koblinsky, & Sugawara, 1986; Hodson & Wampler, 1988; Koblinsky & Atkinson, 1982; Roberts, Kline, & Gagnon, 1978). Roberts et al. (1978) surveyed parents of 3-to 11-year-olds and concluded that most parents feel one conversation about sexuality during a child's development is sufficient. Koblinsky and Atkinson (1982) examined parents' plans for sexuality education of their children and found that both mothers and fathers plan to participate; however, most plan to delay discussion of "value laden" topics until early adolescence. A two-hour program for mothers was shown to improve their teaching skills, but did not increase their comfort with the topic of sexuality or their frequency of communication with their preschool children (Davis et al., 1986). Hodson and Wampler (1988) found that both middle class and working class parents indicated a high degree of comfort in discussing sexuality topics with their young children. However, working class parents in their study preferred to have the mother actually provide information to the child, whereas middle class parents preferred that both parents be involved with giving information to children.

Several years ago, Mathtech, Inc. received a Centers for Disease Control contract to develop, implement, and evaluate a model program to help parents educate their preschool to adolescent age children about sexuality. These researchers identified five areas where parents needed help: addressing their own conflicting feelings about sexuality, exploring their own attitudes and values, obtaining accurate information, developing their communication skills, and understanding their roles as sexuality educators (Alter & Wilson, 1982).

Each of the studies reviewed here started with hypotheses derived from prior theory and research without consideration of respondents' own thoughts and theories about sexuality education. With the exception of the Alter and Wilson (1982) study, none has suggested that parents must address their own conflicting feelings about sexuality. Additionally, an essential piece missing from current research is information that describes in parents'

own words their everyday concerns about sexuality education.

### Parental Influence on Children's Sexual Health

The importance of the family's influence on the sexual health of children is emphasized by sexuality educators (Calderone, 1989; Klein & Gordon, 1992), and it is well accepted that positive sex-related interaction patterns in everyday life are important to healthy family sexuality (Maddock, 1989). Empirical evidence indicates that adolescents whose parents communicated openly with them about sexuality when they were young report feeling much more comfortable discussing sexual topics with their parents and are more likely to make personal decisions about sexual behavior that reflect parental values and morals (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Fisher, 1988).

Parents who successfully communicate with their children about sex seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Prior research indicates that parents have the desire and willingness to teach their children about sexuality (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Davis et al., 1986; Wurtele, 1993), but both adolescents and parents believe that parents have not functioned adequately in their role as sexuality educators (Alter, 1989; Bundy & White, 1990; Klein & Gordon, 1992). If parents acknowledge the importance of their role as sexuality educators and if their effectiveness in that role undoubtedly has a positive influence on their children, why do many parents neglect it?

Various explanations for this incongruity exist. Perhaps parents fear that talking about sexual behavior, practicing decision-making skills, or teaching about AIDS or birth control will give their children "ideas" (Klein & Gordon, 1992). Fear that knowledge of sexuality will cause premature participation in sexual behavior, along with a lack of comfort in communicating about sexuality issues, appears to be a significant deterrent for some parents (Huston et al., 1990; Koblinsky & Atkinson, 1982). It is also possible that most parents and teachers experience so much shame when they talk about sex that they shroud their normal everyday sexual experiences in secrecy (Allen & Baber, 1992). Alternatively, parents may neglect the responsibility they feel for the sexuality education of their children because they are uncomfortable with their own sexuality or are uncertain about what children need at different ages (Croft & Asmussen, 1992). Whatever the explanation, it is likely that very young children can sense the emotional tone with which a parent discusses sexuality, even when they cannot understand the mechanics of the explanation being given by parents (Bigner, 1994). Furthermore, the accuracy or inaccuracy of information passed on to children, punishing or nonpunishing responses to sexual questions or behaviors, nonverbal cues, and questions answered or ignored are all influenced by a parent's comfort with sex-related topics (Davis et al., 1986). It is clear that an opportunity exists for family life educators and others who work with parents of young children to facilitate parents' roles as the primary sexuality educators of their children. But, first, the incongruity between parents' willingness and desire to be sexuality educators of their young children and their ineffectiveness in this role needs to be addressed.

The study described in this article uses data from focus groups to identify major concerns of parents of young children that may impact parents' effectiveness as they attempt to provide sexuality education for their children. The concept of dialectical tension is used to explain the incongruence between parents' willingness to be sex educators for their children and the sex-related interactions they describe in their homes. Dialectical tension refers to the process of creatively balancing two or more conflicting elements (Maddock, 1989). For most parents, the conflicting elements are their experiences of sexuality in their families of origin and their daily experiences of sexuality in the contemporary culture. These elements must be creatively balanced in order for parents to effectively teach their children about sexuality.

### METHOD

This study used focus groups to identify parental concerns that could make sexuality education of their young children difficult and that could, in turn, be addressed in a parent education program. Young children are defined as those between birth and five years of age. Focus groups typically consist of 7 to 10 persons who influence each other by responding to ideas and perceptions and who share concerns—in this case, those about sexuality education (Krueger, 1988). The focus group technique was selected for a number of reasons. First, focus groups provide a forum for gaining information and insight about attitudes and concerns that are helpful in program planning (Lengua et al., 1992). Second, the permissive and nonthreatening atmosphere of focus groups is particularly appropriate for the sensitive topic of sexuality (Krueger, 1988). Third, the focus group technique was considered valuable for this research because examination of sexuality education in the home from the parents' perspective was the ultimate goal (Morgan, 1988).

### Participants

Participants were 28 parents (12 fathers, 16 mothers) of children between the ages of birth and five in a small Midwestern city. There were four focus group sessions, two for mothers (both with eight participants) and two for fathers (one with seven participants and one with five). To recruit participants for the study, letters were sent to the directors of 10 area child-care centers. Directors were asked to mention the request to parents whose children attended their centers and to post the letter for parents to see. Only five of the participants, three mothers and two fathers, were recruited in this way; follow-up telephone calls to directors determined that many directors found it difficult to bring up the topic of sexuality with parents.

The remaining volunteers (23) were obtained through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods and were selected based on gender of the parent and age of the children. All participants were informed by letter of the nature of the study and subsequently signed informed consent forms prior to data collection per university-based Human Subjects Institutional Review Board requirements for researching sensitive subjects. Ages for mothers ranged from 22 to 44 years ( $M = 32.4$ ), and ages of fathers from 24 to 44 years ( $M = 35.9$ ). All participants had two or more years of college and all were Caucasian with the exception of one African American father. All fathers and 14 of the mothers were married; two mothers reported their marital status as single. Mothers reported having from one to five children, ranging in age from 10 weeks to 24 years (mode = 4); fathers reported having from one to four children, ranging in age from 11 weeks to 21 years (mode = 4). The lack of ethnic diversity and the above average educational level in the sample is a limitation of the study.

Separate focus groups were held for fathers and for mothers because of the possibility that, in mixed groups, men might silence women by speaking more frequently and with more authority than women (Krueger, 1988). An additional consideration was that four of the men and women were part of married couples, and it seemed important to eliminate the possibility that one spouse would remain silent and defer to the other in the same focus group (Krueger, 1988). Focus groups were held on separate evenings over a period of time; discussion between husband and wife participants between sessions was possible, but not noticeably problematic.

#### Procedures

Focus group sessions were held in the evening at a local child-care center. Each was scheduled to last 75 minutes, but parents in each group stayed to continue the discussion informally up to 30 minutes longer. Four groups, each consisting of from five to eight persons seated comfortably around a low table, were conducted by the three authors. The focus group process was informed through reading (Krueger, 1988; Lengua et al., 1992; Morgan, 1988) and conversations with researchers familiar with focus group procedures. Sessions were audio-taped for later transcription and analysis. No written notes were taken during the sessions. Parents were given their choice of three children's books about sexuality (Andry & Shepp, 1979; Cole, 1984; Mayle, 1990).

As participants arrived, they were asked to complete a form requesting demographic information. After first name introductions, parents were asked to share an example of an early memory of how they learned about sexuality. This question was originally planned to "break the ice" and to stimulate participation by each parent. However, parental responses to this question proved to be critical to our understanding of parental discomfort with sexuality education. Following this exchange, questions about sexuality education occurring in their homes were presented to the group for discussion. These questions are listed in the Appendix.

Focus group transcripts (averaging 20 pages per focus group) were analyzed using two different approaches. The first involved systematic coding via content analysis and will be reported in a later article; the second consisted of a strictly qualitative, or ethnographic, summary (Morgan, 1988). This article reports the qualitative summary of parental concerns that emerged through analysis of the focus group data. The analytic process involved researchers comparing summary notes after each focus group, reading all transcripts independently, making notes of potential trends and patterns of concern, and discussing and comparing these patterns.

#### RESULTS

As a group, researchers reduced the data to five categories of parental concern. Unless otherwise noted, each of the concerns discussed here emerged from each focus group even though they were expressed in different words and styles. The first two concerns centered around timing issues. Parents in all groups expressed concern about knowing what type and how much sex-related information they should provide for their children at various ages. Parents also reported feeling uncomfortable responding to spontaneous questions from their young children after children viewed situation comedies and advertisements that included, in the parents' judgement, age inappropriate sex-related topics. A third topic consistently addressed by parents focused on what to do when

other people's children were present. Even when parents were comfortable with sexuality education for their own children, they were very concerned about the possibility of offending the parents of other children when, for example, they used proper terminology or allowed family nudity in front of others' children. Gender role expectations, in terms of both children's behavior and parental responsibilities, was the fourth concern identified in all groups. The fifth concern that emerged was the desire to do better as sexuality educators than their own parents did. Quotes that exemplify these parental concerns follow.

### Personal Timing Issues

Parents are unsure about how much sex-related information is appropriate and when is the "right" time to provide it to children. One father said: "The thing that makes me feel uncomfortable is at what point do you really get down to details," and another added, "Will I be able to match the details with the age of the child?" A mother said her motto was to keep alert and answer questions thoroughly enough, but her question was, "What is thoroughly enough?"

What can they understand at a particular age? What should I be possibly looking for? Maybe if they aren't asking for...maybe I should be introducing things that aren't being asked. Am I going to wake up when they are teenagers and find out that I should have been addressing things that maybe didn't come up for one reason or another?

Parents also worry that they could give their child too much information too soon. One mother, who had just had a new baby and was trying to explain to her four-year-old why she was bleeding said:

It's a struggle. It's a real struggle to know how far to go. I find myself trying to skirt around it because I'm afraid that one question is going to lead to another and I'm afraid I'm going to give away too much.

Sometimes the concern is less about timing or amount of information than about the parent wanting to protect the child from sex-related information. One mother, talking about her four-year-old daughter, said: "I want the innocence to last as long as I can. Just be a kid and have fun and don't think about this kind of stuff." Although there is protection involved in this concern, it may be more a protection of the parent than the child.

### Societal Influence on Timing

Many parents feel that societal phenomena (e.g., the AIDS epidemic, TV, cartoons, movies, riding together on the school bus) are forcing parents to take responsibility for sexuality education of their children before the children--or perhaps the parents--are ready. However, this pressure to provide information is balanced by a recognition that such events provide "teachable moments," opportunities to discuss sensitive topics in a natural way. As one mother said: "I basically have no choice. We turn the TV on and my four-year-old is saying, 'Well, what's safe sex?' 'What's a condom?'" She continued to tell about a Bill Cosby show several years ago in which Rudy started her period:

I remember feeling a little bit of anger at that point that I'm being forced to be telling her something because we're watching some family television program, but in the long run, I'm kinda glad for it because it was an opportunity to start that conversation in a real nonfearful, nonpressuring type of environment.

### Comfortable Educating Own Children, But Not Others'

Parents, even those who are comfortable with family nudity during bathing or discussing sex-related topics with their children, are uncomfortable when their children's friends are around; they are fearful of offending other parents. For example, one mother told this story:

My daughter and son bathe together a lot or we throw them in the shower together....One of them had a friend over and my husband said to me, "Well, we'd better split everyone up." Well, everyone is innocent and no one was thinking anything and I thought why should we draw attention to something that maybe there is no attention on, but we just split everyone up. I didn't want this child to go home and tell their folks. What are they going to say?

Additionally, parents report that media attention on child sexual abuse has exacerbated their fears, causing

parents to question even the most innocent interactions. For example, a father who occasionally helps out at his child's preschool questioned how far he should go in his helping.

Someone says, "I've got to go to the bathroom," and the first time it happened I kind of staggered a little bit, you know I was, "O.K., let's go." But, then I thought, now wait a minute. Is the teacher supposed to do this? It's not anything that bothers me, it's more a question of...what is somebody else going to say?

He went on to say that: "People have gotten paranoid. I know it has an impact. I don't know what the right answer is. I guess you judge it based on how well you know the people, how well you know the child."

### Gender Role Expectations

Concerns about gender-related expectations were expressed in focus groups, both in terms of children's behavior and in terms of parent-defined "appropriate" gender activities. Children "playing with themselves" (genital self-touching or masturbation) was discussed more in mothers' than in fathers' focus groups; in general, both mothers and fathers were less comfortable with girls' than boys' genital self-touching. A father talking about his 18-month-old daughter said: "About the only thing that's really kind of sexual is she's started to notice her private parts and from time to time she'll reach down there. You know it's kind of embarrassing for me, her being a girl playing with herself." A mother said:

My son did that [played with his penis]. It was alright. I didn't have any problem with it. If he didn't want to let go, I'd just put him down on the floor without his diaper. But my daughter, I felt uncomfortable with her doing that, I just really had to walk away from the situation because for some reason I was very uncomfortable with her exploring herself.

Additionally, parents seemed very conscious of what they see as appropriate in terms of gender; many referred to examples of how they teach gendered behavior. For example, a father who has an older son and a preschool daughter said:

I do remember as my son grew up that it was more important for him to know that the male sex organ was called a penis and that's all I wanted to hear from him, not that it was a dick or, you know all the derogatory names...but with my daughter it's different, it seems like if she looks at me and says, "Daddy, there's your wiener," I laugh. I think it's funny.

### Concern With Doing Better Than Their Parents

Finally, as parents in the focus groups shared their earliest memories of sexuality education, they were unanimous in their stated desire to "do better" than their parents. As a father of a 4-year-old and 9-year-old commented:

My education, my parents, I don't know where they thought I got it because they didn't give it to me and I felt the same thing, you know, Hey, I'm going to do it differently with my child, but, here I have a nine-year-old and how much have I really done? Not much!!

The endeavor on the part of the parents to improve on the sex education they received from their parents contrasted, sometimes vividly, with many of the sex-related interactions they described with their own children. For example, one father told of his almost four-year-old daughter asking where babies came from. His answer was: "I told her that God puts a seed in mom's tummy and it comes out a baby." This was one of the most conspicuous examples of the incongruity that exists between a parent's stated desire and his or her behavior. The apparent contradiction in many responses prompted us to scrutinize anecdotal data for an explanation.

### DISCUSSION

As the data were analyzed, it became apparent that a lack of knowledge of sexuality and what is normal and/or acceptable at various ages (what is often called scope and sequence) is of concern to these parents. However, this may not be the greatest barrier to parents' full participation in the sexuality education of their children. As the focus group parents discussed the lack of sexuality education in their families of origin, it was clearly implied that

they rejected silence about sexuality and valued open and honest communication about sex-related interactions. However, only a few participants reported behavior in their families of procreation that reflected these values.

It appears that many parents are conducting sexuality education in much the same way their parents did, in spite of their stated desire to do better. Parents are aware of tension within themselves concerning their sex-related interactions with their children. The data suggest that it is a tension between sexuality as they learned about it (or failed to learn about it) in their families of origin and their desire to improve their communication with their children in the context of the complex cultural messages of sexuality and behavior in the 1990s.

Originally, the opening question, "Give an example of an early memory about how you learned about sexuality," was included to involve parents and to get them talking. It was expected that everyone would have a story and their participation would ease them into discussion of a subject they were unaccustomed to discussing. It became clear, however, that responses to this question paved the way for both researchers and parents to understand the parental conflicts.

Most of these parents described early memories of families in which the unspoken rule was, "Don't talk about sex and don't ask questions." At the same time, most of these parents are aware that contemporary culture considers it healthy for a family to communicate openly about sexuality and they want to do the right thing. The dialectic aspect of values and attitudes about sexuality is evidenced by such conflicting concerns.

The term dialectics has been used to describe the "process of creatively aligning competing, and sometimes opposing, interactive phenomena to produce a state of balance" (Maddock, 1989). The sex-related concerns described in the focus groups represent dialectical tension in which parents struggle to bring into alignment their conflicting experiences of sexuality when they were young and their contemporary experience of sexuality with their children.

Maddock (1989) points out that a dialectical balance does not refer simply to stability but to the relationship between stability and change. The degree of health in the family system depends upon how well the family sustains itself as an interacting system while, at the same time, facilitating growth in family members and in their relationships in ways acceptable to the social environment. In other words, the balances are continuously shifting as the system changes. Dialectical tension, a term used by Allen and Baber (1992), results from the process of maintaining this delicate balance, for example, when contemporary sex education programs and portrayals of sexuality in the media overlay and conflict with parents' own early experience of sexuality. An imbalance, or failure to change or adapt, as new information about sexuality becomes available may delay parental changes that would facilitate growth for family members.

As reported in the results section, parental behaviors often contradicted their stated desires. An appreciation of the tension parents experience as they try to balance the influences of their own early experience of sexuality and the current social environment is helpful in explaining conflicting behaviors. One mother articulated her tension this way:

Oh, did I say the right thing, did I use the right words, did I have the right body language when I said it? Did I sound like my mother when I said that? I don't want to sound like my mother. I think I sounded like my mother and I don't like myself for sounding like that.

Parents' recognition that they are having difficulty balancing their conflicting experiences of sexuality has important implications for family professionals.

## IMPLICATIONS

Many of the parents were concerned that they are more like their parents than they want to be in the manner they are providing sexuality education for their children. At the same time, they are moving away from the position of their parents on sexuality education, which often was to say nothing and avoid any sex-related situations. Parents in these groups reflected on and questioned the processes their parents utilized and they are searching for better ways to communicate with their children about sexuality.

This research confirms that parents need and want guidance about how and when to best discuss sexuality issues with their young children. It also reveals the questioning that parents are doing and the difficulty they have

bringing about a synergy of their past and present experience of sexuality. Helping parents with the balancing process necessary to deal effectively with the inevitable tensions of human experience is an area that family professionals have not adequately addressed.

When focus group participants were asked, "How can professionals help you with the sexuality education of your children?" parents in each of the four groups suggested parent discussion groups "like this." Moderators gave no information about scope and sequence of content, answered no questions, and gave no opinions about dilemmas posed by the participants, but parents obviously felt the process was meaningful. This experience may indicate that a setting that makes an effective focus group, that is, open, relaxed, nonjudgmental, is also effective in helping parents balance their own disparate experiences with sexuality and, consequently, may contribute to parents' ability to take a purposeful, proactive role in the sexuality education of their children.

These results indicate that mothers, and particularly fathers, may benefit from a program that provides an opportunity for support from other parents, an examination of parental life experiences, and a discussion of various dilemmas confronting them in their sexuality education efforts. In focus groups used in this study, fathers were as vocal as mothers about the challenges they face in the sexuality education of their children. Additionally, they were as reluctant to end the focus group session at the agreed upon time as mothers were.

Family life educators have an opportunity to help parents balance their internal tensions about sexuality and encourage them to play a purposeful, proactive role in the sexuality education of their children. Programs that involve parents by drawing upon parents' own experiences as resources can be very effective. For example, discussing just one or two scenarios describing parent-child interactions about sexuality can help prompt parents to examine and discuss their own experiences. Parents have the readiness and interest to learn about sexuality education from their own backgrounds, as well as from everyday experiences with their children. Results of this study indicate that parents of young children are naturally motivated and come prepared to learn. Programs that utilize this natural motivation may inspire parents to try more positive sex-related behaviors in everyday family life, such as regarding all children's questions as "teachable moments" and answering them simply and without embarrassment.

Family life, community, and cooperative extension educators all play important roles in educating parents. Development of a sexuality education curriculum for parents that utilizes experience-based learning and group interaction opportunities is recommended to facilitate parents' development as sexuality educators for their young children. Family professionals who wish to develop programs for parents of young children should encourage parents to: (a) articulate their personal experiences with sexuality education in their families of origin and in their current interactions with children, (b) recognize how background experiences influence current sex-related interactions with their children, (c) share with other parents their sex-related parenting dilemmas and how they have handled them, (d) clarify their own sexual values, and (e) understand and accept the inevitable tensions present in educating their children about sexuality.

## APPENDIX

### Questions Used in Focus Groups

- \* Give an example about an early memory about how you learned about sexuality.
- \* What sexuality education is occurring with your preschool child?
- \* Do you feel you have a responsibility as a parent in the sexuality education of your preschool child? What is your responsibility?
- \* Are there ideas about sexuality that you feel should be included in family discussions before a child goes to kindergarten? What are they?
- \* Where do you as parents get information on how to talk to your child about sexuality?
- \* What areas are you comfortable with? What areas appear to be most challenging? Why?

\* In what ways could professionals help you to become more comfortable talking about sexuality with your preschool child?

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