

CHAPTER 16

Sex Education

These days many parents leave it to the schools to teach their children sex education. This is unfortunate because: (1) by and large, the schools do a lousy job; (2) leaving it to school is far too late to begin learning about sex; (3) ninety percent of kids would prefer to hear about it from their parents.

The old 'birds and bees' talk is not the way to do it. There is just too much to tell a child about sex to do it in one go - especially if they are young (and the earlier the child can learn naturally about sex, before they pick up all sorts of misinformation, the better). If you leave it till the child is eight or more, both you and they are going to become embarrassed and the whole thing will only reinforce their feeling that sex is somehow wrong and not something you talk to your parents about.

The basic principle is to teach sex the same way you teach other things that interest your kids - answer their questions honestly, frankly, as fully as they want and in terms they can understand. And give things their proper names. One way or another, you are going to transmit sexual values to them as well as information (or even if you don't give them any information); make sure you know what your sexual values are and what values you want to give your children and make sure your words and actions support those values.

The best sex education could simply be to have two parents who love each other - which is not to say that you should let them watch you in the act. On the other hand, if they should happen to catch you making love, don't make a big deal of it; just assure younger children that you weren't hurting each other and that it was just something adults sometimes do to show they love each other. If your older children, who know what you were doing, apologise for disturbing you and, without embarrassment, either tell you the reason for the intrusion or withdraw, you'll know you're well on the right track.

School-based sex education classes can certainly usefully supplement home-based sex education, especially when combined with counselling and medical services. Many teenagers want information about the biology of sex and the details of sexually transmitted diseases and contraception that are beyond the knowledge of many parents. However, if these courses consist only of biology and dire warnings and convey the message that sexual activity for adolescents is inherently harmful, sinful and destructive, they can do more harm than good. They should also cover such topics as intimacy, interpersonal relationships, sexual decision making and coercive sex and admit that sex, for teenagers as for older people, can be pleasurable, responsible and caring.

Research has taught us that sex is a learned behaviour. It is important that boys do not continue to learn about sex from *Playboy* or girls from their own magazines or from a boy imbued with *Playboy* attitudes.