

SEX, THE CHILD AND THE FAMILY

THE ROLE OF
THE TEACHER

by

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I must begin by being absolutely honest and say that I find myself with a very divided mind over the question of sex education. I am far from convinced that it is as necessary as we are constantly told, and I have a sneaking suspicion that we could do with hearing a little less about it than we do at present. There are some very strange misconceptions about the subject. We are repeatedly informed that all previous generations suffered from shame, guilt, inhibitions and ignorance, that only by tearing off the trappings of romance and reticence from sex can we liberate our children from fear and prudery; that the spread of venereal disease and illegitimacy is the direct result of too little sex education; that happy and stable marriages can never be achieved by a couple unless they have had regular lessons from the age of 8 upwards and, preferably, several pre-marital affairs in which to practise what has been so assiduously preached to them.

Quite frankly, I am not at all sure that I believe any of these frequently reiterated statements. As I look around my own circle of friends and relatives, I see supremely happy unions, firmly based on the concepts of chastity before marriage and fidelity within it. Looking back on my own childhood and adolescence, I recall completely uninhibited discussions with parents and friends on every aspect of sex and I can only think of one of my acquaintances who reached the age of 16 with somewhat hazy and inaccurate ideas on the facts of life as they were then called. We may have listened to pop songs about 'moon' and 'June' rather than to incitements to sexual activity so explicit that even the BBC bans them, but we were not simple-minded enough to believe that married life was really like that. When we got engaged or were going steady, we had no fear of sex. Rather did we look forward to it as a natural part of our forthcoming marriages which, we firmly believed, would be well worth waiting for. Was the pre-war attitude to sex, therefore, so very wrong and *must* we assume that more and more sex education will *necessarily* result in more and more happy marriages, fewer men and women ending up in mental hospitals, fewer schoolgirl pregnancies and a fall in the incidence of VD and abortion among teenagers?

I think we must be very honest with ourselves and explore our own motives in preaching the benefits of sex education. What, if we are honest, is *our* attitude to sex? I assume that none of us here would be traditional repressive ascetics, rejecting all sexual activity as somehow sinful and only grudgingly accepting it inside marriage, intolerant of what we consider to be abnormal and ready to forbid any public or scientific discussion of sex. Some of us, however, may be what I call enlightened ascetics, who feel that youth is a time to learn self-control and discipline, which we regard as a barrier against harmful self-indulgence.

Even more of us, perhaps, reject such absolutes and have as our criterion of moral behaviour how it will affect relationships between people, not only those concerned, but others involved in broader ways. Our concern may be to give children and young people an internal control in a world where old values are changing. If we call this group the humanistic liberals, the next category is that of the humanistic radicals who believe in complete sexual freedom.

From this it is only a short step to the fun moralists who encourage as much sex as possible on the basis of the more the better, and finally, to the sexual anarchists who attack chastity, virginity, monogamy, even marriage and the family, and advocate the suppression of all sexual taboos and ideas of sexual morality. At least some of the material which has recently been published under the guise of sex education and even some of the advice which I have heard given by so-called responsible people has seemed to me to be the product of the last two categories.

What then is our position and what do we teach our children? BBC Radio Four puts out a weekly satirical programme called *Week Ending*. I happened to listen to one recently in which a rather dreadful pseudo-schoolboy was reading his diary in which appeared the following item: 'Wednesday 3 p.m. Sex with Miss Brown. Boring as usual.' Whatever we teach our children, let us at all costs guard against *this* reaction. Ideally speaking, the parent is the proper person to instruct the child and it should be possible for the matter to be raised naturally and without embarrassment, in the home, at a very early age. I was one of the lucky ones who had a mother worth a thousand *Little Red Schoolbooks*, and I cannot remember *not* knowing where babies came from. However, we must face the fact that very few children receive sex education at home, many parents being hampered by emotional difficulties and inarticulacy so that the traditional 'facts of life' talk by father to son has become a national joke. So, if a mere 5 per cent of our children are given the necessary information in the home, the rest should not be left to pick up what they can from playground gossip. Parents *should* be able to talk about sex to their children, and as parent-substitutes, teachers should be able to talk about it too. We talk freely about food and drink, sleep, and all the basic needs of life. Why can we not talk naturally of sex, too? Is it perhaps because, unlike eating and drinking, sex is a private matter between two people and we forget that fact at our peril?

I feel very strongly that there is great danger in the type of education in which the sexual relationship becomes just another appetite like eating and drinking. It was, I think, Friedrich Engels who said that sex should be as natural as a glass of water but too many sexual liberationists conveniently forget that he went on to ask: 'But who wants to drink from a glass greasy from the lips of others.' Of course, we must recognize that a child is a sexual being and that this should not be a source of shame and guilt. He is not merely a receptacle for information but a developing personality with an inner life of his own. If he is to grow into someone adequate for the personal relationships and responsibilities of life, the fact of his sexuality cannot be excluded from his education. Yet neither should it be over-emphasized and the impression be fostered that sex is the only thing which matters or even the most important thing, *merely* an appetite like eating and drinking, which must be satisfied at all costs, if the individual is not to suffer irreparable damage. I would oppose with all the strength of which I am capable, any form of sex education which seeks to divorce physical experience from a

loving relationship, creating the kind of person who 'has sex' rather than 'makes love'.

This is why I believe that attitudes to sex can be taught in a variety of ways in the course of teaching other subjects in school. To most young children, society means mother, father and teacher. Their influence can provide a natural approach to sex, free from feelings of guilt and fear and inculcating attitudes of self-respect as well as respect for other people, responsibility, openness and a generous heart—all calculated to help our children to adjust to marriage, a state in which I happen to believe.

Which brings me to something else in which I happen to believe, that talks, books or films which deliberately play down and even belittle the idea that sex should be seen in the context of the married relationship are harmful and irresponsible. Of course, children have a great deal of freedom nowadays and mature early, therefore it is all the more vital that we should show them that this is a great responsibility. Unless they are going to grow up into unhappy drop-outs, they will have to live in society and society is generally against unacceptable behaviour. This means that the individual cannot flaunt the rules of the society in which he lives without suffering the penalties. It is sheer nonsense to pretend to our children that adultery, illegitimacy, abortion, wife-swapping and what have you, have overnight become OK things, just because a few loud-mouthed and perverse individuals assert that this is so. We should beware of believing the propagandist who shouts: 'What I tell you three times is true.'

I realize that what I am now going to say may not find favour with all of my profession but I am not convinced of the necessity to provide in school a separate syllabus of sex instruction—sex at 3 p.m. with Miss Brown, in fact, but it does require a concerted effort whenever opportunities occur to educate a pupil for life. I see no reason why the facts about the body should not come naturally as part of the Biology syllabus, as is done in my own school. Nothing could be worse than one example of sex education which I saw recently on television with a determinedly with-it young man making dreadful jokes about, of all things, erection and impotence to a mixed class of sniggering 15 year olds. I am not suggesting that the Biology teacher should hide the facts in a mass of vague chat about rabbits and dogfish—the nearest that my teacher in the Thirties ever got to the subject. In my school, Human Biology is taught, and learned, without embarrassment or inhibition on either side, and there is no limit to the resultant questions which the girls ask their teacher, a married man with teenage daughters in the school.

However, do not let us delude ourselves that mere acquisition of the physical facts of sexual reproduction is enough. As boys and girls mature, it is essential that we should explain to them the relation between development and emotion, that they become attractive to one another just at the time when their emotions are most unstable. For instance, girls need to be told that boys have strong feelings and that petting is a dangerous game. Boys need to be warned that girls will flirt without the smallest intention of allowing intercourse. Both need, before the age of consent, factual informa-

tion on contraception, venereal disease and abortion and heaven forbid that all these vital matters should be presented in the manner of the *Little Red Schoolbook* which pooh-poohed the warning that adolescents should beware of strong sexual feelings, dismissed VD as 'irritating but not usually serious' and called abortion 'a minor operation'.

This kind of information needs to be given in an altogether different context from the Biology lesson. Here, the teacher in a boarding school is at an advantage for there are countless opportunities for Housemaster, Housemistress or Matron to guide discussions into the desired direction and to encourage questions, perhaps sparked off by some item in the day's news or some television feature. In girls' schools, the needlework class is often the great gossip shop. As teacher and girls sit around cosily sewing, many barriers go down and intimate subjects are freely discussed. Whether the woodwork or metalwork shop provides boys with just such an atmosphere, I wouldn't know, but any kind of lesson which occupies the hands and leaves the mind free to roam, could, with the right teacher, become the setting for a discussion of personal problems. Certainly, any course in Liberal Studies or Home Economics (and I see no reason why boys should not have the benefit of such courses as well as girls), should have room for free and flexible discussion groups to which are invited doctors, social workers, marriage guidance counsellors, psychiatrists and so on.

All that I have suggested is a far cry from taking 8 year olds and subjecting them, willy-nilly, to such films as Dr. Martin Cole's *Growing Up*. Sex is not, and should not be just a school subject, any more than it is just a physical appetite. It is not possible to live without food and drink. It is possible to live, and even to remain reasonably sane and cheerful, without sex. Unless the teacher can present sex in the context of a loving, human relationship, he is doing more harm than good, and the ideal loving, human relationship is still, I beg leave to assert, a stable, happy marriage.

As we think about the role of the teacher in sex education, and consider the suitability of material such as books and films, I believe that it is valid to look closely at the beliefs and life-style of the author or director, for it is important that any teacher of this sensitive subject should be a person, who in his or her own life, sets an example of stable and responsible attitudes. There is a saying which goes: I cannot hear you when you talk for what you are speaks louder than what you say. A child takes an attitude not only from what he hears in lessons and reads in books but from what he sees, especially what he sees in his parents and in those parent-substitutes, his teachers. One critic of my recent book, *The Vulnerable Generation*, in addition to sneering at my surname and my profession, condemned the book out of hand because I quoted from the Bible and Shakespeare. My head is bloody but unbowed and I do not apologize for making this Biblical allusion which I recommend to any teacher who, by his teaching, offers up a child on the altar of his own worship of the great god Sex. 'Whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.' Let us, for goodness sake, and I use

the word advisedly, bear in mind that our aim should be to take away ignorance, not innocence.

And when the last word has been said on the subject of sex education, there will be still one more important matter for the teacher to consider and that is the effect on the individual child of its developing sexuality. It often surprises me to find both parents and teachers at a loss to understand why adolescents are so difficult: I sometimes wonder whether adults are incapable of thinking back to how it felt to be 14, an age when like Alice after she drank the medicine, you alternate between being ten inches high and a creature nine feet tall, demanding at one moment to be mothered and the next to be deferred to as a complete adult, and all the time shot through with that sensation of having fireworks inside your skin. Nowadays, everyone has learned the jargon of sex and can chat superficially about deep, emotional things, but do we perhaps underestimate the real bewilderment of the child growing into adolescence? We look back and see the whole landscape as from a hill but they are down on the plain at the brambly entrance to the dark forest that the path runs through, and some of them are more afraid than they will admit. We can at least assure them that there is a path.

Important though it may be to give a child factual information about the sexual pressures which come with puberty and adolescence, it is perhaps even more important that we understand that these pressures bring with them a passionate need to love and to be loved, through all his sometimes awful and always unpredictable behaviour. The teacher must give a great deal more than sex instruction if he is to help a child to cope with the problems of growing up. When the winds of adolescence begin to blow, teachers and parents need a double ration of love, understanding, tolerance, sympathy and above all, patience. In all our teaching, and certainly in our teaching about sex, we must strive throughout the turbulent teens to make a child aware of his virtues and strengths as well as his faults and weaknesses. We must try to preserve a kind of break-water of compassionate imperviousness against which the storms of adolescence can batter without doing any damage, thus providing a harbour of security and certainty in which the child can grow up.

At the same time as we exercise our sympathy and understanding, we must not be afraid to stand up resolutely for what we believe to be right. I am absolutely positive that young people want us to have principles, if only so that we can give them something to argue about and to rebel against, to flex their developing muscles so to speak. Any teacher who discusses sex with his pupils and is so terrified of seeming to dogmatize, of being called propagandist, that he says nothing at all about his own convictions can hardly blame the young if they very understandably come to the conclusion that he has none. We must never shrink from letting the young for whom we have responsibility know where we stand on the important issues of the day, including sexual morality.

Obviously, one could say a great deal about what we should teach our children with regard to sexual morality but this is perhaps not the place, nor have I the time, for it. But this I must say: I happen to think that it is morally

wrong to use someone purely as an instrument of physical pleasure and that fear of consequences is no basis for self-control. Respect for another person's integrity, both physical and spiritual, insists on self-restraint, and love demands the kind of self-giving which is also self-denying. One rule for living which we must teach our children is respect for the personality of others. It is not easy to turn the teen-ager's passionate pre-occupation with his own uniqueness into an awareness and an admission that everyone else is equally unique and, therefore, has just as much right to consideration as he has; but we must try to do it. This should be absolutely basic in all human and social contacts and especially in sexual relationships. If we can succeed in teaching this to our children, we—and what is more important, they—will be saved a lot of heart-ache, and they will grow up to distinguish between the primitive reaction to desire—'I want therefore I grab'—and the truly civilized 'I want but if it is best, I can wait or I can even say no'.

True freedom is freedom *for* not freedom *from* and it is in this, and not in a squalid welter of permissiveness that our children will find the key to victorious living.
