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A Program of Sex Education In Public Housing

MARCELLA VOLINI MEYER, M.D.*

INTRODUCTION

In the under-educated world of big city public housing projects, sex education is an outstanding need. The great lack of knowledge and understanding about the dignity of man's nature, the needs of that nature, and especially of the true meaning of a sexual relationship between human beings is made manifest through marital problems, family disintegration, patterns of illegitimacy from one generation to another, and teen-age "love fests" in the building stairwells and other undesirable places.

While the rest of society may propose "solutions" with which we cannot agree and which make no sense, e.g., providing contraceptives to unmarried women so their unwanted children will not be a burden on the community, we must admit that, as Christians and as physicians, we have utterly failed to communicate to this large group of people our knowledge concerning sex and its proper place in life, and the modes of sex behavior which make for real human happiness. To concentrate our efforts on resisting the former, while totally ignoring the latter positive approach is surely wrong and nonproductive.

With the cooperation of the Medical Director of the Cook County Department of Public Aid in Chicago,

Dr. George Lull, four programs of sex education for mothers on public assistance were organized and presented by the author in three separate Chicago Housing Authority projects from September, 1963 to June, 1964. Some 175 mothers have participated thus far.

The program is directed primarily to the parent, since it is the firm belief of this author (a physician-mother) that parents at all levels of society today are far too willing to give up this privilege and responsibility which belongs to them, and that a greater good is accomplished by helping the parent to be a teacher to his child.

FORMAT AND APPROACH

Each program consisted of three one-and one-half hour lecture-discussions with the mothers, followed up by a session with their daughters, age 10 years and older, all of whom were required to have signed permission slips. At one project, Dr. Warren Staley presented a follow-up session to the sons, age 12 years and older, whose mothers had attended one or more sessions. At each project, a social worker or community worker had invited a representative group of parents from each building in the development to form and to work on a planning committee, which met for group discussion explaining the purpose of the course, review of the author's literature on sex education,

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and planning publicity and baby-sitting services for the program in order to encourage the maximum number of tenants attending.

CONTENT OF THE COURSE

Session 1:

- a) Why parents can do the best job.
- b) Giving correct attitudes much more important than "the facts" because attitudes influence behavior.
- c) Nature of sex—emotional and physical; contrast to lower animals.
- d) Part of growing up is learning to manage our sex urges.
- e) Sex is good—given to us by our Creator; the human body is good.
- f) How to answer questions.
- g) Menstruation, fertilization, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation.
- h) Contrasts between the male and female — physical, emotional, and attitudes toward sex.
- i) Great need to let children know what is expected from them in the way of sexual behavior.

Session 2: Teen-Agers and Sex

- a) Acceptance and respect for his body and the changes it will undergo at puberty should be explained to the youngster.
- b) Seminal emissions.
- c) Sex experimentation and sex play; masturbation; what they mean and how to handle these problems in youngsters.
- d) Problems of dating — petting, premarital sex relations, venereal disease, alcohol.

Session 3: The Young Child and Sex

- a) Basic emotional needs of the child — how the child gets se-

curity and identity from his parents.

- b) Normal child development and what to expect.
- c) Authority and discipline.
- d) Answering sex questions from the young child.

REFERENCE MATERIAL

For both parents and teen-agers, the Sex Education pamphlets of the Science Research Associates, Inc., of Chicago, are excellent. The series of pamphlets on sex education put out by the American Medical Association is also good. An out-of-print pamphlet, *The Toddler and Sex*, published by the Paulist Press, gives simple answers for the questions from the young child.

AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS

The Christopher sex instruction record for parents was played during the course to illustrate several points of the lecture. The following films, obtainable from the AMA, were used at various times in some of the programs:

Human Growth
From Generation to Generation
As Boys Grow
From Boy to Man
The Story of Menstruation

PARENTS' COMMENTS

Parents were asked to write their comments or suggestions as to what they thought about the course. These comments and suggestions indicated the following:

1. They learned how to cope with problems of small children—especially questions about sex from the pre-school child.
2. They will not be as shy about explaining sex problems, as they

- arise, to their own children. They can also tell them more about the things teens should know.
3. The parents wished the course were longer—there is no end to what they would like to know about themselves.
 4. Mothers with fatherless children found it much easier to talk to their teenage sons than formerly.
 5. The human body is thought of more as a beautiful creation and not anything to feel guilty about.
 6. They know the best way to handle small children who play with themselves is to keep them busy instead of subjecting them to ridicule.
 7. Children should be told the truth about sex.
 8. As adults they had much incorrect learning to change which their parents had taught them.
 9. They understand that sex *per se* has no meaning except that it is based on love, loyalty, self-respect, unselfishness, and devotion.
 10. They can explain to their teenage sons and daughters the dangers and effects of petting, alcohol and disease.

CONCLUSION

This project has been extremely rewarding to the author, personally; other physicians are urged to initiate similar programs. What happens to these children now in housing projects will greatly affect our own children's lives; therefore, in helping others, we will also help our own.

ADVICE TO AUTHORS

Articles on topics of potential interest to the Catholic physician as a *Catholic and as a physician* are earnestly solicited. A goodly portion of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY readers are not members of the medical profession but are engaged in allied health fields, teach moral theology, or serve in hospitals, and material for their benefit would also be welcome. The subject matter may be predominantly philosophical, religious, or medico-moral in nature. Material should be typewritten, double-spaced, with good margins and on one side of the paper only. Manuscripts (*original and one copy*) should be submitted to the Editorial Office of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY, 1438 South Grand Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri, 63104. One additional copy should be retained by the author. Full editorial privileges are reserved. References if used should appear at the end of the article and should conform to the usage of the *Index Medicus*. (This format is that employed in the Abstract Section of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY.) A brief but pertinent *curriculum vitae* of the author(s) should accompany the manuscript. The Thomas Linacre Award is made annually to the author(s) of the original article adjudged to be the best to appear in THE LINACRE QUARTERLY during each calendar year.