

# **Educating children in sexuality**

**By Louise Kirk**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you, Fr Gerry, for that introduction, and thank you, too, for having me here. I should perhaps add to what you have already said that I come not as teacher, or a doctor, but as a mother, one among you. My husband and I have four children, ranging in age from 23 – 16.

Educating children in sexuality is at once a big subject, and an intimate one, a private one. It is not my role to tell you what to do, but rather to give you some thoughts on how to open your children to “the deepest yearnings of the human heart”, as Pope Francis put it last week. He cited these as permanent commitment to solidarity, fidelity and fruitful love. Education in sexuality is thus teaching at the deepest level what it is to be fully human.

You will want me to bring this down to everyday terms, and so I thought I would approach the subject under the headings of: why, what, how, and when, and then make some remarks to bring the whole together before taking your questions.

## **Why should you as parents be your children’s teachers in sexuality?**

From what I have just said, it is obvious that sexuality is too serious a topic for parents to delegate. You wouldn’t be here this evening if didn’t think likewise. However, we are in the minority. We all know that sex education is done at school, and that we are on the brink of it becoming compulsory even at primary level. So we need to have clear arguments, and to pass these on, because we are in a battle for the minds and hearts of children.

It is not just that the schools provide sex education. A majority of parents are in favour of it, and willingly forego their task. Teachers tell me that it is not unusual for girls to experience their first period at school with no prior instruction. In fact, I was asked to write a story for teachers to have up their sleeve to help cope in this situation.

It seems unbelievable that this should still be happening, and I think we need to ask why. It’s certainly not that mothers don’t know about periods, or that they can’t see their daughters’ blossoming shapes. Perhaps there is too much expectation that the school does everything, and teachers know best. Certainly, parents are wary of exposing children by taking them out of lessons. But I think all of this hides a natural diffidence, strongest among those who are wary of their own sexual history. It is well known that single parents are most likely to want to delegate.

There is a further factor, which is that parents were often ill taught themselves. I discovered this first round the governors’ table of my children’s village school. It is often older men – and I have witnessed this elsewhere – who complain that they were never taught anything either at school or at home and,

years later, they still feel bitter, becoming before one's eyes the hurt young boys who were tossed into life so ill-prepared. For these people, men and some women, any sex education is better than none. If you ask them if they went on to teach their own children, they usually say no. They are happy to leave it to others.

So what are some specific reasons why parents should do the teaching?

The first, of course, is that you will be doing it anyway, through osmosis. The most powerful way we teach is through example, through the way we behave in the family, and also by how we relate to our own parents, friends and other relatives. Your children will be watching you and taking in all sorts of details. Even the government recognises your key contribution<sup>1</sup>, though you could be forgiven for not noticing it.

And then there are the surprise questions. These are not things you choose but can be sprung on you by your children at any moment. Usually all that is wanted is a straightforward sentence or two, telling the truth without going into any detail. But sometimes it is worth probing before launching out, because it is easy to become too complicated. Some of you may have come across Gervase Fynn<sup>2</sup>. He tells the story of how, as a young inspector of schools, he found himself in a primary school science class. A small girl came up and asked him, "Sir, how do you spell sex?" In his confusion, he began to cross-examine the girl, who looked increasingly bemused. After a short time, she gave up with him and went up to the teacher and said in loud voice, "Miss, Sir doesn't know how to spell in-sects. I know the "in-" bit, and I only asked him about the "-sects".

Relax and let your children lead you. Showing that you are open to discuss anything will encourage them to confide in you. There are many different approaches, coloured by the character of your family life and even the pets you may have. I have been told by a midwife that things were discussed frankly with her small children in a way that might have shocked another family whose profession was behind a desk.

But there will come a moment when children will need a full explanation of puberty and what they can expect of sex in the future, and that is what I am suggesting you should be preparing to give them. They need to hear this from you because there is no such thing as value-free sex education, and if you want to pass on your values, you have to teach them.

Your children also have a right to hear about something so important from you. They turn to you for anything which is new and perhaps a bit scary and sex should be no exception. Knowing and loving your children as you do, you can give them one-to-one attention, tailoring your words to their characters and levels of maturity. You can also pace them, without being confined to a particular afternoon in the summer term.

More than that, you are going to be standing by your children for the long-term, when teacher and school nurse have long been forgotten. Your vision is necessarily raised to the whole of life, which is not the target of school sex education.

I had this out with the school nurse in our village school. "Your lessons are geared to getting children through the teenage years in one piece, aren't they?" I said, knowing my government documents<sup>3</sup>. "Yes," she said simply.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sex and Relationship Education Guidance](#), see chapter 5 on the parents' role (pp 25-26), DfEE 0116/2000. Issued in July 2000, this remains the official guidance which schools are meant to follow.

<sup>22</sup> [Gervase Fynn](#), author, public speaker and former School Inspector in the Yorkshire Dales.

<sup>3</sup> School sex education was introduced in the UK not at the request of parents, or of teachers, but of doctors who persuaded the government that it would bring down teenage pregnancies<sup>3</sup>. It was always associated with the promotion of contraception. For a brief history, see Annexe B of [my response](#) to the government's PSHE Consultation of 2011 at: [www.alivetotheworld.co.uk/reports](http://www.alivetotheworld.co.uk/reports).

There is yet a further reason why you as parents are unique, and that is because by imparting sexual knowledge to your children, the fruit of your sexual love, you are assuring them at the deepest level that sex is good, and that its life-giving nature is intrinsic. There is a sense of mystery that goes beyond the man and the woman. By speaking in this intimate way, you are also recognising the adults your children are becoming, and releasing them to their future independence. In a sense it is a rite of passage, and by opening up this topic you deepen the friendship between you on other things as well. You remain your children's first mentors.

## What to teach?

At the Humanum colloquium<sup>4</sup> on the complementary nature of male and female in marriage, Dr Rick Warren, of the Saddleback Church he founded, pointed out that you can't begin to describe anything until you have worked out its purpose.

To say that sex has a purpose assumes that it has a design. This itself has now to be defended. I think that we in this room accept that sex is a gift from God. It is immutable, and doesn't change over time - in fact, evolutionary theories grow out of sexual reproduction. We can't choose or change our own sex. As a gift, it is precious, beautiful, but it is also fragile and needs to be treasured. It is a gift which is specifically designed for marriage. Without sex, you could have no marriage, and no family life as we know it. Sex is at the heart of what it is to be human.

And the purpose of marriage? Dr Warren enumerated six purposes for marriage, all of which he backed up with biblical references. I'll pass on his six, as he gave them, with one add addition:

1. *Elimination of loneliness.* What a neglected idea, and yet there it is in Genesis 2: "It is not good for the man to be alone." Children, on the whole, take company for granted and are far from thinking about later loneliness when they first take interest in the opposite sex. Secular sex education emphasises enjoying the present, and isn't helping. Policy makers appear blind to the fact that the loneliness which is already assaulting our society is going to get worse as the promiscuous young become old without firm bonds of marriage and few if any children to look after them. This aspect of sex education is very serious and sorely neglected.
2. *Expression of sexuality.* "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife." Sexual desire needs to be strong to entice young people to break from their existing families and start their own, but that strong desire then needs to be directed.
3. *Multiplication of the human race.*
4. *Protection and education of children.*
5. *Perfection of our own characters.* Dr Warren explained that the husband is sanctified through his wife, and the wife through her husband. The object isn't to become happy, but to become holy with happiness a hoped-for byproduct. Learning to love is a labour, and the number one tool is your spouse. Pope Francis has been saying similar things recently.
6. *Reflection of the union of Christ and his Church,* quoting Ephesians 5.
7. *To reveal the inner life of the Trinity* in whose image we are made, and in revealing the nature of God to reveal man to himself. This seventh purpose comes from St John Paul and his Theology of the Body.

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<sup>4</sup>The Humanum Colloquium on the Complimentarity between Man and Woman in Marriage was hosted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican between 15-17 November 2014 and was attended by representatives of 15 faiths and churches. For further information and to see the presentations, go to: <http://humanum.it/en/>.

When you start teaching your children, you are hardly going to dwell on this list, but everything you put across should be moulded by what it contains.

Another speaker from the Humanum conference gives my next clue on content. Lord Sacks<sup>5</sup> states that:

**“Science takes things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean.”**

Your children will of course need both, the biology and the moral and religious arguments, but I would suggest that it is worth taking them separately. It is important that your children see that whatever you teach stands up in human terms. This way, if their faith weakens in later years, their moral life retains some protection: they have two feet to walk on. It also gives them a vocabulary to talk to friends.

This was brought home to me in the summer, when we had a young Spanish student to stay. She was a lovely girl, and had been well educated at home and in her Catholic school. But she is now at a state university, and told me that, although she knows what is right and wants to keep to it herself, she doesn't know how to explain it to her friends and as a result she feels quite isolated.

There is a lot of new science to absorb. I suggest that you need to know some detail. Your children are likely to get it at school, and it seems wrong to me that, in this of all subjects, children know more than their parents.

What's more, you can then check what they know for accuracy.

I have been shocked by errors I have found. For example, the notorious *Living and Growing* sex education programme for primary schools gets menstruation wrong. And science books can be no better. My son's science book, approved for the Common Entrance exam, had a chapter on Human Reproduction which was riddled with mistakes. The school is an excellent Catholic one and the headmaster had no idea what was being taught. A survey done in Spain a few years ago found no sex education programmes which were completely accurate. Sometimes the error, for instance in the effectiveness of contraception, is designed to change children's perspective, and impacts their behaviour.

It is not only the misinformation which is unfair to children, but also the omissions. Programmes that I have seen have missed out the mucus cycle, at least in primary school, and also the new science of the brain. There is a lot of new knowledge on how sex affects our hormones, and even the structure of our brain – its impact is so big that physical links within our brains are changed for good. All of this tells us that sex really does bond us to another person, biologically as well as emotionally. It is designed for life-time attachment. We further know that the pre-frontal cortex, the most sophisticated organ in the brain which enables us to make sound judgements, only fully matures between the ages of 23-25, that is after many young people have already decided upon their careers and even married. This surely says that parents are entitled to continue guiding their children even after they have left home. It certainly makes a nonsense of the idea that children make “responsible decisions” on their sexual lives aged 14.

You should be explaining to them the science behind natural fertility regulation, so that it becomes the obvious option later on. Mothers can take this further by showing their growing daughters how to chart their cycles. Older children will anyway need to know how contraception works and how it impacts upon the body, with realistic figures for its failure (why not also explain to them the politics and money tied up in it). They will need to know about STDs (without disgusting or frightening them) and the basics of same-sex attraction.

### **How do you teach?**

You will have already seen that there is a lot to teach. I wrote my book so as to make this easy to absorb.

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<sup>5</sup> Lord (Jonathan) Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth.

*Sexuality Explained*<sup>6</sup> is based on biology, that is, it starts from God's creation rather than from God, who is not mentioned. However, if once you treat not only the child in the womb but also the sperm and the ova as sacrosanct, then the rest of Catholic moral teaching falls into place and makes sense. It is not difficult to include a sense of wonder. Super abundance is a sign of God's presence, and surely it is there in the huge number of eggs and sperm we have, each with their unique DNA.

The ten chapters are designed to be taught over a period of years, beginning pre-puberty, but it is hoped that parents will first read the book as a whole. In fact, it was other parents who suggested I present the information in this way, since they said that the individual chapters, which I had thought of as separate leaflets, only make full sense when seen together.

*Sexuality Explained* is designed to complement the larger *Alive to the World*<sup>7</sup> programme of values and virtue education of which I am UK Co-ordinator. I have taken from *Alive to the World* the idea of teaching through stories.

My aim is to have a book which makes the task of teaching as easy as possible, having especially in mind those who approach the subject with diffidence. You can sit and read the story as it is with your child, stopping to talk over what you are reading, or you can speak in your own words. There is a summary of *Points to remember* after every chapter, together with a *Glossary*, and *Diagrams* to cut out to illustrate what you are saying. Having these gives you a framework so that you get to the end of what you want to say – you can't always go back once the moment is lost. It is also possible to hand over a chapter to read. This works well with older children, who have a growing sense of privacy which it is important to respect. Sometimes even an 11- or 12-year-old prefers it and, of course, the book can "just be left around".

The book is designed to teach by example as well as by practical content. Various scenarios are given on how one might begin a conversation. Sometimes it arises from a child's question; sometimes the parents set it up. On occasion it is best to have pencil and paper (or book) to hand; on another it is good to speak where you don't have to look at each other, for instance in a car.

Whether or not you use my book, two things are important: that you do have up-to-date materials to work from, and that you set aside time. Usually it is recommended that mothers teach daughters and fathers teach sons – children tend to prefer this and it benefits you as well as the children.

## When to teach

My own feeling is that it is good to start young, provided that you do not disturb the children's tranquillity in the latent years before puberty. There is a specific reason for saying this, which is that young children are very pro-life. When they have the beginnings of life explained to them, they are not thinking of future girl- and boyfriends: they are thinking, "That was me!"

You will want to be aware of their physical maturity, and also that of their friends; what may be coming up at school; and what outside influences may be reaching them. If they have older siblings, you may well find that the job has already been part done for you. Children are very good at sieving out what they aren't ready for and are quite capable of saying, "That's enough".

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<sup>6</sup> *Sexuality Explained: a Guide for Parents and Children*, by Louise Kirk (Gracewing, 2013). See [www.alivetotheworld.co.uk](http://www.alivetotheworld.co.uk) for further details. I wrote the book to correspond with the Vatican's guidelines: *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. This small book is well worth reading and is downloadable from the internet.

<sup>7</sup> See our website: [www.alivetotheworld.co.uk](http://www.alivetotheworld.co.uk).

## The theory and acting on it are not the same

It is a curious thing that once morality all but signified sexual morality, whereas now for many people the sexual is one sphere where there is no defined right or wrong. Sometimes older people seem to be acquiring their morals from the young rather than the other way round. People who would not have dreamt of living with their spouse before marriage defend their children or grandchildren doing so. It is as though as a society we dare not speak moral truths out loud for fear of hurting somebody's feelings.

It is very easy to fall into a similar trap ourselves, disbelieving the truth of a particular teaching because we are not living up to it. Children need to be made very aware that the teaching is one thing, and the practice another. Even if we fall, the teaching itself remains clear. Likewise, we, and they, should never assume that people believe in the sort of life they happen to find themselves living. Many people can be trapped into a way of life from which it is difficult to extricate themselves, but this does not mean that it is all they aspire to, or want for their children.

So teaching your children to be sensitive to others, while keeping their own moral code clear, is important. There are many ways to strengthen their willpower – I mentioned our *Alive to the World* programme which can also be used at home and is very good at helping in this. Keep an eye on their friends, what they are watching and reading, and later the careers advice they are given. Girls in particular are often encouraged into professions without a thought as to how these may mix with bringing up a family. And remember the sacrament of confession. This is another important aspect of growing up, where children learn not only to be frank about their sins but also to take personal responsibility for their spiritual development, with the aid of grace. It is worth finding a priest they like and trust. I remember when ours were young thinking that parents should be lining up with their children for the sacrament. After so much failed nagging on my part, suddenly there they would be, asking what more they could do to help.

## Conclusion

I have already quoted from a Protestant pastor and a Jew and I shall end by quoting from another participant in Rome, from the “Foreign Secretary” of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Hilarion. He was present at the recent Family Synod in the Vatican and spent an hour with Pope Francis just before its close. The day before, in an address in Naples, he said:

“We Christians believe that the gift of life is a gift from God, and that human life is not under the power of anyone other than the Maker of the human race. This belief renders Christians free from the oppression of any political power and any ideology. It makes them capable of being martyrs and confessors when the Church is persecuted; and witnesses to the truth and heralds of the Kingdom of God when the Church is recognized.”

One could say that the family is now being persecuted in the West, well, if not persecuted we are certainly under pressure and we need to fight, and to equip our children to fight. Sometimes we become disheartened but I sincerely believe that the tide is beginning to turn and by teaching our children their own sexuality well, and by helping other families to do the same, we are contributing to a counter-revolution.

It was not only religion which was persecuted in Communist Russia, but also the family. So when Metropolitan Hilarion tells us that Russia is now opening three churches a day, or 26,000 in the last 26 years, has 800 monasteries filled with young monks and nuns, new Church schools, institutes, theological faculties, and when we discover that a Congress attended by thousands on the subject of large families took place in the Kremlin this last September there is every reason to be full of hope. We shall need to pray for it, and to work hard. What we know is that truth is on our side and ultimately we shall win.