

A Different Approach to PSHE and Sex Education

London Regional Congress
World Congress of Families

Baden Powell House
June 2-3, 2010

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www.alivetotheworld.co.uk

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It is a great privilege to be here, and to be taking the platform after so many excellent speakers. This makes my task the easier, for it is my role to take from what has already been said and to build on it.

My topic is a very positive one: how do we pass on all that we have discussed here to where it counts, to the next generation of children?

We have heard a lot about the critical importance of marriage and the family. We have also dwelt on the role of faith and sound values, which pleases me a lot as sometimes the two subjects are kept apart, even though they impinge so closely on each other. Morality is after all attached to belief in God. Bringing children up without morality and without faith in God has been a disastrous experiment.

We have explored some of the many other attacks that family values are coming under. Various speakers have mentioned: materialism, technology, UN and government agencies, the media, pornography. I would add in here starved imaginations. I once went to a talk given by Father John McDade, the Jesuit Principal of Heythrop College. He pointed out that our faculty of imagination has been designed to be filled with God and things spiritual. Where spiritual life is barren, there is a vacuum and this vacuum is all too easily filled with negative images. He was talking about violent computer games and avatars but one could also mention pornography.

There is yet another attack on family values which I think hasn't been touched on sufficiently, and that is fear, fear of many types but especially fear of commitment.

To all these points, one can add that there has been a breakdown in the transmission of good values between one generation and the next. There is a specific problem where parents are absent, or where relationships are broken in some manner. But even where family life is strong there is a loss of confidence, and we often find the rather odd situation where children pass up their morals to the previous generations rather than the other way round.

Taking all these thoughts together, I would argue that making available good quality school classes in PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) is no longer an option but has become necessary. This is not just because of widespread Government pressure to include it on the school curriculum – if there are no good materials bad ones will take over. It is also because many parents are sadly no longer doing their job – some are not capable of doing so – and because, even where children are beautifully brought up in the home, they risk being

isolated among their peers. Good children deserve support at school so that they are not the odd ones out but can belong to a community of like-minded youngsters. They need PSHE of the right kind as much as children from difficult homes.

I am leading up to the reason why I am here. Many of you will have seen the *Alive to the World* books which are on the table. You will have had a leaflet about them explaining that they are part of a new programme of PSHE which was originally developed by a team under Christine Vollmer. For I, like Sharon Slater, am the fruit of a World Congress of Families, in my case that held in Warsaw in 2007. At the end of the Congress Christine approached me with all her customary charm and asked what I could do to bring the *Alive to the World* books into England. I did not then know what I was taking on – I innocently assumed that I would be advertising some existing English books among a few schools that I might know. Three years later, I stand here as the Co-ordinator for the UK *Alive to the World* project, having led a team of editors and liaised with teachers and with our publishers Gracewing to create a UK edition. I have helped to hone the books, but they in turn have shaped my thoughts on PSHE and on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). So in what I am going to say now I am inspired very much by the *Alive to the World* project. You can take it that the books fulfil the objectives I am now about to set out.

The first general point I make is an important one. Current PSHE, and even more SRE programmes, are designed to get youngsters through the teen years in one piece. The previous Government in its Teen Pregnancy Strategy, which continues policies set out in earlier sex education programmes, did not even claim to do more than target teenage pregnancy. Targeting pregnancy has led on to targeting many other “poisons” which afflict young lives: STDs, alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, bullying etc. As we heard yesterday, many of these poisons are in fact interdependent: the wrong use of sexuality can upset a person’s social equilibrium and lead on to other abuses, and vice versa.

Every other aspect of education is not limited to negotiating the school years. Education is designed to prepare young people for adult life, and I completely fail to see why an exception should be made here. We need to claim back PSHE and SRE as real education, something very positive. PSHE programmes should be based on looking ahead to all the qualities that a strong, well rounded adult will need, and then see how those qualities can be built up in children in an age appropriate way. We now know so much about the neurological windows of a child’s development, when he or she is ready to absorb particular lessons. This is what we need to target, with real learning which addresses the whole person.

I stress this latter point because any PSHE programme will have failed if it only protects children until the school door shuts behind them. What we need are programmes which enable children to live chastely right through their college days and beyond. We need education which supports them in committing themselves in the bonds of marriage in their twenties and thirties, to wanting to become parents, and to staying happily married as productive citizens into old age.

Teaching marriage makes practical as well as moral sense as soon as you look at the whole of life’s progression. One speaker well known to the World Congress of Families is Patrick Fagan. Had he been here I am sure that he would have told us how marriage lifts children out of poverty. It is obvious that a married couple is better off than a single mother, but did you know that a married man living with his wife and family can expect to be 20-30% better off than a co-habiting man in the same position? A large part of school education is designed to

prepare children to earn a good living, and on these grounds alone it does not make rational sense to avoid teaching marriage.

Marriage also provides an answer to a second sexual crisis which we are currently experiencing, one which I consider even more serious than that of teenage pregnancy: I am talking about the crisis of adult loneliness. I predict that the problems caused to society by teenage pregnancy will pale into insignificance beside the problems coming to us from loose unattached adults. We are beginning to hear about this in the press, but we haven't even begun to meet its seriousness when the current generation of promiscuous youngsters grows into old age, having so messed up their lives that they are unable to bond into lasting relationships either with spouses, partners or children. We know about the financial problems of providing for pensions, but I am also talking about the social problems of actually caring for such unattached elderly people. One can understand why euthanasia has the potential to become as much of a scourge as abortion if we do not do something to stop it.

So first, what are we going to teach? And second, how are we going to teach it?

What are we going to teach

1. The truth about relationships We relate to others in our whole persons: spirit, mind and body. Authentic relationships are formed when the language of our bodies matches the language of our spirits and of our minds. Within marriage and the family, warm physical relations are appropriate, but most relationships in life are minimally physical. This includes the relationships we have with others at school, at work and in society at large. These relationships are not unimportant just because they are not physical. The reverse is true. The relationships we have with others, both of our own sex and with members of the opposite sex, are many and are extremely important and it is on them that the strength of society also rests. This needs training, and it is appropriate in youth to be shown how to relate well with others without thinking first of the physical. Sex and Relationships Education should be renamed: Relationships Education, including Sex. It is by learning how to form good friendships and working relationships with others that we forge the characteristics of a good husband or wife and in the process become good citizens.

I should add in here that not every person is called to marriage. Some people will always remain single – the lives of priests and nuns are an icon for others who also have a celibate vocation, or who do not marry for whatever reason. However, whether or not children are called to marry, all should be formed to be what I call “marriageable”, to be brought up to be well-rounded individuals at home with their sexuality.

Part of understanding the physical side of sexual relationships is understanding the truth of our fertility. This knowledge should be imparted to children at the appropriate time and in an appropriate way. Here I want to say something very important. Society talks about “Reproductive Technology”. Add the word “Modern” and we are given the impression that we have made solid scientific advances in methods of family planning and birth control. This is a sham. Using Modern Reproductive Technology we as a society have in fact:

- Lost control of procreation – births occur out of turn and do not appear when they are wanted; and
- Lost control of bonding – youngsters are bonding inappropriately at school and then failing to make the lasting bonds necessary in their 20s and 30s to found new

families. Fascinating new knowledge of brain development actually shows us how sexual relationships change the physical pathways of the brain. Bonding really does happen, and if it happens inappropriately the capacity to bond again in the future is damaged.

2. Values In addition to teaching the truth of human relationships, we need to teach that there are universal values, that there is such a thing as good behaviour and bad behaviour and that this includes sexual morality.
3. Virtues These are habits of good behaviour, which require knowledge of right and wrong but also strong will-power. The greatest of all the virtues is, of course, charity, the emptying of the self to love and serve others.

How are we going to teach

True relationships, values, virtues. In this room it is easy to talk about them. Outside and in the classroom it can be difficult, very difficult indeed. One cannot preach: children are quickly enticed if only by curiosity to try out the behaviours which are prohibited. One has to attract. Here we have to have confidence that the resonance of truth can in itself go a long way to appeal to children. But lessons must be fun and age appropriate, so that children want to learn.

At this point, I return to *Alive to the World*. Christine's answer to creating an enticing programme was to return to the age-old method of conveying moral truths, and that is by telling stories. The stories are about two cousins, Charlie and Alice, who grow up through the books alongside their readers, sharing the concerns typical of children of that age. Subjects are introduced at the appropriate time and not according to government diktat. The first book in our UK series, for age 7-8, talks about teamwork. Beginning with school games and sport, it shows how what is learnt about rules and positions of responsibility on the games pitch also applies in the home, at school and in the wider community. The books are attractive so that children want to pick them up and read them. Because they are stories, there is no invasion of privacy as one finds with some PSHE programmes, and marriage and family life are portrayed very positively. The more intimate facts of sex education are reserved in separate stories downloadable by teachers from our website. These can then be printed out and given to parents to share with their own children with all freedom at an appropriate time.

Before coming to a close, I want to draw attention to two features of *Alive to the World*:

- By using stories, *Alive to the World* is able to set realistic scenarios which show how difficult life can be and how it presents us with conflicting priorities. The programme is not based on sentiment, on general platitudes about being kind and thinking of others. It puts before the children the reality of temptation because, as we all know, virtue is forged by facing up to temptation, falling into it, saying sorry and starting again.
- It is not a religious programme, but it prepares the bed into which the seeds of faith can be planted. In this room we represent many faiths and we have talked about how we can co-operate in teaching family values. *Alive to the World* is an offering to all faith communities, and I hope that many of us will be able to work together in using it.

Thank you