

The Catholic Herald

Why I took on the sex ed establishment

Simon Caldwell meets Louise Kirk, the mother of four teaching children how to resist pressure to conform to Britain's sexual mores

Sadly, it is becoming clear that parents must take an active interest in sex education policies of their schools if they are to protect their children from what is in effect plainly exposure to pornography.

The evidence for this is abundant. The content of one Sex and Relationships Education CD-Rom produced by BBC Active last week led to the Schools Minister Nick Gibb summoning Corporation executives to ask them to review the resource.

The video showed an animated couple having sexual intercourse, as well as computer-generated images of penetration, full-frontal nudity of a real couple in the bedroom, and information about masturbation and “wet dreams”. It came with a red label warning the viewer: “Contains explicit content. Review before use” (begging the question of why it is targeted at children as young as eight in the first place).

“Parents are justifiably worried materials like this are being used in lessons,” the astute Mr Gibb observed.



Photo: St Gabriel News and Media

One such parent is Louise Kirk, a mother-of-four from Crewe, Cheshire, who fought against the introduction of “Living and Growing”, a graphic sex education programme produced by Channel 4, into the

Derbyshire school where she used to serve as a governor.

“I was horrified by it and did my best to stop it coming in,” she said. “I looked around to see what other programmes there might be and found there were precious few about. There was a big gap in the market and I thought, ‘yes, I am going to do what I can’.”

Mrs Kirk is now the UK coordinator for Alive to the World, which provides schools with Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) resources compatible with the teaching in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, the 1995 landmark Vatican document that insisted on the primary responsibility of parents in the education of their children in chastity and authentic human love.

This revolutionary programme was devised by Christine Vollmer, who sits on the Pontifical Council for the Family, and is being used by more than 100,000 pupils in at least 16 countries to great effect.

It relies on story-telling, rich in dialogue, as the medium to educate children on such sensitive topics as relationships and sex education, aiming throughout to encourage “positive character development” among pupils.

It not only offers suitable material to support teachers in all kinds of schools, but crucially it also offers parents the resources they need to educate their children at home on such delicate matters.

Fundamentally, it respects the religious and moral convictions of parents rather than the views of such groups as the Sex Education Forum, the Family Planning Association and Brook – not forgetting the BBC and Channel 4.

It can support parents in a vital task they are often reluctant to do themselves, because of feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment, with the result that those with vested interests in contraception and abortion are able to fill the void.

Mrs Kirk, a History graduate of Oxford University, is keen to see the rights of parents in this area prevail.

She has translated some of the resources into an accessible Anglicised version and she has already piloted the project at Westminster Cathedral Choir School.

It proved to be a success and her resources are being tried out in a cluster of Catholic schools from London to North Yorkshire, including schools in Manchester and Derby, with an arc of dioceses across northern England showing themselves to be especially sympathetic. They include her own Diocese of Shrewsbury as well as those of Salford, Lancaster, Nottingham and Leeds.

Although secondary school materials, and sex education material in particular, are under preparation, Mrs Kirk decided to principally target primary schools in “trying to lay firm foundations, particularly with relationships education”.

The new and comparatively novel approach, she explained, is focused on the cultivation of the virtues rather than the “distorted” values of self-gratification, ambition and pleasure-seeking.

Youngsters are encouraged to “make the most of their talents” and to use their talents for the benefit of others.

“We are teaching children to love other people by teaching them to respect

themselves,” says Mrs Kirk. “This feeds into good sex education.

“The fact is that if we are ever going to turn around the ghastliness of sex education in this country we have to begin with the younger children and show them what true relationships are all about.

“The foundations are very different from the secular content of sex education where modesty doesn’t have any role,” she continues.

“We teach self-respect, privacy and all those things - making the best of your talents, being hard-working and part of a team. We see ourselves as (offering) a united approach to all aspects of growing up.

“What is education about?” she asks. “It is about the future adult.

“For each child, you want to give them a full life in the sense of being a good citizen, a good career path and a solidly-based family life. Those three aspects are going to be important to both the success of the individuals and the wider community.

“We are very keen on developing the right attitudes towards family as well as towards work and friendships.”

This, she says, involves teaching children the truth about their fertility and to respect it, taking as the starting point the body rather than God because the aim is for the resources also to be used by non-Catholics.

“But a lot of my work has been to try to make the concepts in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* better known,” Mrs Kirk adds.

“The whole idea is to make the Church’s teaching on human sexuality alive to people by showing them ordinary fertility.

“Once you understand ordinary fertility you can have a much greater grasp of what the Church is talking about.”

Certainly, as former teacher of the Creighton model of Natural Family Planning, Mrs Kirk finds the popular secular position of preparing schoolgirls to spend their reproductive lives suppressing their fertility with steroid drugs to be “extraordinary”, especially when the authorities sometimes conspire to keep parents in the dark about their children’s activities, often with disastrous consequences.

Yet it was the intention of the last Government to impose this position through compulsory sex education of children as young as five years.

Its attempt failed but the threat remains and the Coalition Government is at present consulting on PSHE and sex education and is considering the rival arguments of those who wish to impose statutory programmes against those who believe schools should be free to teach the subject as they wish.

Mrs Kirk set out her own views in a lengthy report sent to her MP, Edward Timpson, the Conservative member for Crewe, who was so impressed that he forwarded it to Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education. Last week she received a letter from Mr Gibb, who, as we know, is now acutely aware of the concerns of parents, who informed her that her reflections will be considered as part of efforts to establish a model of good practice.

“We would hope that they will be taking it up and taking it seriously,” says Mrs Kirk.

“We have something which we can offer to everybody, extending the values that we have known and loved in the Catholic Church to children everywhere, whether they are Catholic or not.”