

Some thoughts on creating a sex education policy for a Catholic diocese or school

By Louise Kirk

Introduction

Educating children in the truth of their sexuality touches to the core of the evangelisation of the young. If the Church cannot explain to them matters of such importance in language which makes sense and which answers their practical needs, young people are likely to abandon not only the Church's moral framework, but, in due course, their faith.

To devise such a sex education policy for a diocese or school is not easy. It demands firstly that the Church's teaching is presented fully in language which young people can comprehend and be excited by. It should be arresting enough to pique the curiosity of those who may not be Catholic. It will only do this if it also makes sense of everybody's own understanding of themselves, their yearnings and their difficulties. This applies not only to the young people, but to their parents and teachers who have to be convinced themselves in order to convince others. It has to be done in a world where many false facts are circulating, with children's sex education a prime target for perpetrating them.

The Church has long been aware of these difficulties. Twenty years ago, in 1995, the Pontifical Council for the Family published an excellent short booklet of guidelines to help. Called *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, it was written at the express wish and to the design of St John Paul, now patron saint of the family, and is at the core of many good sex education policies. It has shaped my own work, and everything I write below is influenced by it.

Truth and Meaning leaves a central conundrum. The guidelines insist that it is parents, not teachers, who should be the prime educators of their children in matters of sexual intimacy. However, many parents do not understand or follow the Church's teaching themselves, so how are they to be persuaded to teach something they do not believe in?

Another problem is that, while *Truth and Meaning* explains the vision of the Church, and gives many practical hints on when and how to teach children about the body and physical intimacy, it does not set out the scientific and sociological facts, such as how natural family planning or contraception work, and nor should it. Scientific knowledge is always developing and so too are the new ethical situations which teachers find themselves in.

I have found that, while the moral and theological truths of sexuality are often well described in Catholic sex education policies, they give no information on how to find the latest correct scientific and biological facts. This is hardly surprising given how poorly disseminated these have been in our country. Teachers thus fall back on resources pressed upon them by secular organisations, not realising how many errors of fact and morality lace these materials. They often paint natural family planning, for instance, as unreliable, giving the Church's teaching little chance with students. I find this tragic, given that science in all its guises (medical, social, human) supports the Church's teaching as the sure guide to joy and a flourishing life.

The thoughts I set out below are exactly that: thoughts. They are offered from my experiences over the last twenty years as mother, a school governor and, latterly, as UK Co-ordinator for the PSHE programme for *Alive to the World*. I have also spoken to many parents and teachers in promoting my book *Sexuality Explained: a Guide for Parents and Children*.

Sex education as a social issue

Getting sex education right is a social as well as a moral imperative. We have more research than ever before on why we should be educating children for marriage and chastity. Their benefits stretch across the board, from faith and health to wealth and human happiness. Thinking about how to promote marriage (and celibacy) among children should be a key goal of any Catholic school, to form the next generation for a flourishing life.

Fifty years after the creation of the Pill, we also know a lot about contraception, its effects and its efficacy. We know that it fails in ordinary life much more often than in clinical trials. We know that abortion rates rise with its use, and how it damages health and future fertility. We have also discovered that using contraception interferes with the natural bonding of the sexual act, as do repetitive masturbation and use of pornography. Those who engage in these activities reduce their chances of settling into a happy marriage.

When children are sexually active, all these negative effects are multiplied. Children are particularly bad at using contraceptives – they don't like them, and the haphazard nature of their relationships is ill-suited to the needed discipline. The last major government-sponsored survey of the subject, the Labour government's *Teenage Pregnancy* report of 1999, describes this and goes on to say:

“Teenagers have a high rate of failure from the contraceptives they do use – principally condoms and the Pill”.

In a report full of statistics, none are given here, presumably because they would be too embarrassing. The establishment answer is to press for more sex education at younger ages, despite its forty years of failure, and to continue telling children that:

"Not making love is obviously 100 per cent reliable, artificial forms of contraception if used properly are nearly 100 per cent reliable and natural forms of contraception if used properly are 85-98 per cent effective" (as in my son's GCSE textbook on **Roman Catholicism: Ethics**, used at his good Catholic school. The chapter on IVF does not even mention e.g. NaProTechnology, even though NPT is generally more successful than IVF and helps couples in other ways as well.)

Research into the functioning of the brain since the 1990s gives us another reason to question contraceptive-backed sex education with its emphasis on choice and consent. We now know that sexual bonding is not just an emotional feeling, but takes place in a physical way through the release of chemicals. Sex is designed to bond us permanently to our sexual partner. We have also learnt that the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for making mature judgement, only fully develops when a young person reaches the ages of 23-25. The idea that children are in a position to make risky decisions with long-term impacts in their young teens is shown up for what it is.

The children most at risk of early sexual experiment are those from the poorest families, and those from broken homes. The Labour Government's Teenage Pregnancy report of 1999 estimated that children in social class V (unskilled manual) were almost *ten times* [their italics] more likely to become pregnant than those in social class I (professional). These children are also the least likely to marry. It is a tragedy that

they are the ones most targeted by sex educationalists, and with the very things which are likely to make their lives worse.

National and international pressure on sex education

The difficulties schools may have in teaching sex education appropriately are compounded by the constant pressure upon them to take part in what is in effect a battle for the souls, minds and hearts of children. It is waged at both a national and international level, and there is a large amount of money behind it.

The latest PSHE guidance, for instance, sent out by PSHE Association to every secondary school in England, was rubber stamped by Teresa May and Nicky Morgan early in 2015 as "an excellent resource which will provide pupils with the skills and knowledge to keep themselves and others informed, healthy and safe." It does not mention marriage in its 65 pages but bases the "morality" of sexual activity on consent.

There is also relentless international pressure to teach along lines which contradict the message of the Church. As an example, here is an extract from the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s Sex Education Guide for Europe of 2010:

The following excerpts are from the World Health Organization's *Standards for [Sexuality Education in Europe: A framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists](#)*

For Children Age 0-4 years

"Give information about enjoyment and pleasure when touching one's body . . . masturbation"

"Enable children to gain an awareness of gender identity"

"Give the right to explore gender identities"

For Children Age 4-6 years

"Give information about early childhood masturbation"

"Give information about same-sex relationships"

"Give information about . . . different concepts of a family"

"Help children develop respect for different norms regarding sexuality"

For Children Age 6-9 years

"Give information about . . . different methods of conception"

"Give information about enjoyment and pleasure when touching one's own body, early childhood masturbation"

"Give information about friendship and love towards people of the same sex"

For Children Age 9-12 years

“Give information about different types of contraception . . . enable children to use condoms and contraceptives effectively in the future”

“Gender orientation and differences between gender identity and biological sex”

“Give information about pleasure, masturbation, orgasm”

“Give information about sexual rights as defined by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the World Association for Sexual Health”

For Children Age 12-15 years

“Gender identity and sexual orientation, including coming-out/homosexuality”

“Give information about pleasure, masturbation, orgasm”

“Enable teenagers to obtain and use condoms and contraceptives effectively”

“Give information about sexual rights as defined by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the World Association for Sexual Health”

For Age 15 and up

Surrogacy, medically assisted reproduction and “designer” babies, genetics”

“Help teenagers to develop a critical view of different cultural/religious norms related to pregnancy, parenthood, etc.”

“Help teenagers to develop a change from possible negative feelings, disgust and hatred towards homosexuality to acceptance and celebration of sexual differences”

“Sexual rights: access, information, availability, violations of sexual rights, right to abortion”

These guidelines are not confined to generalities but are very precise, even down to target ages. Family Watch give a useful [overview](#) of the scary sexual rights agenda pushed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation through Comprehensive Sex Education. In May 2015, the WHO introduced further guidance to promote "[BSCs](#)" - [Brief Sexuality-related Communications](#) whereby unqualified health care professionals are to be given a minimal training to provide opportunistic one-to-one advice on sexual health. This is for girls aged 10 upwards, without their parents' knowledge, and is intended to back up Comprehensive Sex Education. One can imagine that they will target the most vulnerable girls, probably, as elsewhere, pushing upon them the unpopular long-acting contraceptives, which have many bad side-effects.

At home in this country, we already have pressure to teach pornography at school, so that children can distinguish between "good porn" and "bad porn". My [article on the subject](#) does not go on to discuss how teachers may be affected by having to look at pornographic images.

What to do?

There are already good guidelines in *Truth and Meaning* on how to set out the Church's vision for human sexuality. It is the practical side which may presently be lacking and which I think should cater for the following:

1. **We have to take seriously St John Paul's determination that children should first be taught sexuality in the home.**

This is difficult to do in an age where parents are often reluctant to teach, and where schools are expected to. It is also difficult when parents are asked to teach something that they may not know or understand. To work, a policy would need to spell out a cut-and-dry plan of action, including a campaign to educate parents in their responsibilities.

There are many reasons why parents are the best teachers (see my [talk to a group of parents](#) of November 2014). **Pope Francis** has also been speaking out. In his Wednesday general audience of 20 May 2015 he said:

"On the other hand, there has been a proliferation of so-called 'experts' who occupy the role of parents even in the most intimate aspects of education ... and parents are expected only to listen, to learn and to adapt. Deprived of their role, they often become excessively apprehensive and possessive with regard to their children, to the point of never correcting them. They tend to increasingly entrust them to 'experts', even in relation to the most delicate and personal aspects of their life, placing themselves in the corner. In this way, parents run the risk of excluding themselves from the life of their children. How many excellent examples we have of Christian parents full of human wisdom! They show that good family education is the backbone of humanism. *Its spread through society is the resource that allows us to compensate for the shortcomings, the wounds, the lack of paternity and maternity that affect the least fortunate children, and works true miracles.*

"I hope that the Lord may give Christian families the faith, freedom and courage necessary for their missions.

If family education rediscovers the pride of its central role, many things will change for the better, for uncertain parents and disappointed children. It is time for fathers and mothers to return from their exile, and to fully resume their role as educators."

I have italicised what to me is a kernel of truth which many people miss. You help the poorest and most vulnerable children not by group sex education for everybody, but by encouraging the strongest families to lead the way and bring up the standard for everybody else. Of course teachers and catechists can step in to help individual children, but the norm should be for schools and parishes to act as a catalyst to get the parents teaching, especially in the primary school years.

In any case, if we do not now prepare parents to do the teaching, we may very soon be in a position where schools are prevented by government from speaking essential truths, and we be left with a handful of households passing on this important element of the faith.

2. **We should give children the desire for chastity and marriage in PSHE classes from the earliest age.**

The transmission of good values is ideally done in the home, but works best when it is also reaffirmed at school, and when children see their friends living and aspiring to the same values.

Where the transmission of values has broken down in the home, children rely on the school (and church) delivering them.

In addition, society is pressing many erroneous values and we need to help children counter each of these. Self-worth can only be built on truth, and what counts in life is not what we have, or how good we are at things, or our perceived popularity, but who we are, and how much we love and give of ourselves to others. The government is itself moving away from teaching self-esteem to promote Character Education (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/england-to-become-a-global-leader-of-teaching-character>).

Chastity has to be put across as a positive virtue, not just as a negative abstinence. I particularly like the definition that in chastity we learn to be true to ourselves as incarnate spirits, unity of soul and body, and to love each person round us fully according to the truth of the relationship we have with them, as a mother, a sibling, a friend, a neighbour, a husband or wife. The WHO's framework for sex education quoted above not only destroys the meaning of the sexual act but, by putting a distorted emphasis on sex, destroys the truth of these many other relationships of interest to children.

All the other virtues come as part of loving other people. We love when we work hard, when we show respect, when we are kind, truthful, loyal, obedient, humble and all the other characteristics that make for a strong, upstanding person who contributes to society. It is particularly important to give boys from poor and broken backgrounds the confidence to earn a good living and so help them to become desirable as future husbands.

I have learnt the importance of values education from Christine Vollmer and her *Alive to the World* programme with which I am involved. I have a declared interest in saying so, but I have come to believe that this kind of programme is essential as an adjunct to any robust programme of sex education.

3. We should take over the initiative and, at secondary school level, teach every aspect of sexuality better than anybody else following the latest known knowledge.

Like the WHO (see above), a Catholic policy should spell out a list of requirements with ages attached. This should be done respecting modesty and with the active involvement of parents, whose right of withdrawal from any sensitive material would be respected. No child should ideally leave school without knowing, e.g.:

- the importance of the ecology of the body as part of our care for ourselves and the natural environment
- the science behind natural methods of family planning
- the mechanisms behind contraception, its true failure rate when used by young people, its impact upon health and future fertility
- the psychosexual difference between using NFP and contraception, including respective divorce rates
- the truth of IVF and contrast with natural methods of treating infertility, including psychological impact and respective success rates
- masturbation, its connection to sexual fantasy and use of pornography, and why this can interfere with later sexual satisfaction and marital unity
- population control and its consequences
- the sexual chemistry of the brain

- genderism as a distortion of the different and complementary natures of the two sexes.

This last subject Pope Francis has been speaking about with urgency recently.

To implement such a programme, a school would be wise to take a cross-curricular approach, and look at all the resources being taught in science and geography as well as in RE and PSHE. Secular programme writers already do this and the Catholic approach should be as thorough.

Concluding remarks

The urgency of family breakdown concerns many people who are looking for better answers. At the same time, scientific and sociological studies from every discipline confirm that living the Church's teaching gives those answers. We have every reason to teach the Gospel of the Family with confidence and should be preparing sex education policies in that spirit.

The human knowledge which supports that teaching is as yet little known. I suggest that it is best taught as a separate subject, in non-religious language, so that it can be seen to stand up by itself and apply to anybody, of any faith. It needs to give young people a new 'story' to fill their imaginations, and new heroes. Why not tell them about people like Drs John and Lyn Billings, Dr Jerome Lejeune or Dr Thomas Hilgers, who, against hardship and with comparatively few resources, have done so much to change our world for the good. In this way we can start to take over the lead from the current sex educational community, who have necessarily to tie themselves to out-moded models because the latest science, e.g. of the brain, undermines their ideology.

It will be difficult to do. Schools are being bombarded by materials from well-funded organisations at home and abroad which are being pushed by national governments. Sex education is a battlefield in which the minds of the young are up for grabs. If Catholic schools do not join that battle in at least as energetic away, and do so in the public square with their dioceses behind them, we are piling up yet more problems for the next generation.

Preparing what I am suggesting here would be a lot of work. It would need schools and dioceses to co-operate with each other to produce new resources and teacher training. Technology is a great asset and could provide, e.g. an online portal where teachers could share ideas and be kept up-to-date with a library of background information on every topical issue. We should expect to work internationally.

Reaching children in Catholic schools is only a first task. It is part of Catholic responsibility to rescue children everywhere, in every sort of school, from the inaccurate and sometimes degrading materials on which they are presently being brought up. To do this, we have to have a programme of excellence which makes sense in human terms. When people see that, in addition, it knits closely with the full beauty of the Church's teaching, both will be disseminated, and both prevail.

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31 May 2015