

Why the parents' role in sex education is unique

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Introduction

It is a privilege to be invited from England to be among you today at this inspiring Congress, and I give my warm thanks to Dr Ligaya for inviting me to speak.

In England at least, and I suspect that you may be familiar with this in your own countries, there is enormous pressure to bring explicit sex education into schools at ever younger ages. Parents have come to expect it, and many even want it.

It arrived some 15 years ago in my own children's village school. The programme was clever, very slick, completely immoral and, which shocked me even more at the time, biologically inaccurate. I went round my friends one by one to explain why the programme was so dangerous. They appeared to listen to me, but not a single one supported me in public. One parent even reported me anonymously to the Headteacher. It was one of the most painful experiences of my life.

If you listened to me this morning you will know that I am not against all school sex education. Sex education taken in the round is actually a large subject and to some extent Christian schools have always taught it through moral and social education. Once children are older it can be helpful to have the school reinforce the good messages learnt at home and back them up with more academic knowledge.

- What I am talking about now are the *first lessons* when a young child becomes aware of the biology surrounding the sexual act.
- I shall go on to speak of why the *parents are never able give up on their role*, even if it may change in nature. Parents are there for the long haul.

Schools and parishes in support of parents

Now I suspect that there are many teachers in the room, and I am not belittling your role. I believe that what you teach and the way you teach is also vital. For a start, it helps to have the good values which support marriage and family life taught children from the earliest age at school. For this

reason, I am the UK Co-ordinator of the international [Alive to the World](#)¹ character education programme.

I further think that it is through schools, and also through parishes, that parents will be encouraged to take up their role.

You are not suddenly going to get many parents teaching something they find difficult without a lot of support. They need to be given materials which help them in their task, and they need social support to encourage them. Workshops for parents, led by teachers, and/or parish catechists, can do much to make sex education approachable. It is also you the teachers to whom individual children may come with their questions and their problems, and many of you will be doing so much to help those from especially difficult homes.

Strong families helping more vulnerable ones

There will be many other families represented here who take it for granted that it is you as parents who should be the first to explain sexuality to your children. You are vitally important. For too long sex educationalists have trampled upon the innocence of well-brought up children, disorientating young people who could become future leaders of faith and society. We need strong families like yours who don't just cut themselves off and do their own thing but are prepared to share their experiences and help other parents.

Our concern must be for every child, for Christians and non-Christians alike, for children from any sort of family, and for parents who mean well but find it difficult to teach a subject they feel unsure about.

And it is not only the young who are confused about sex: it is also many adults.

Given these difficulties, you have to really believe that the parents' role is essential, or you will fail to carry other people with you.

Yes, there will be parents who won't take part, but if we are serious about boosting family values and helping to turn society around, we cannot focus just on the worst cases. It is by allowing the stronger families to lead the way that the large numbers in the middle, the good but uneducated families, will follow and this will make it easier to help those who are most vulnerable.

Giving priority to children's wishes

So why do I say that we should be making more effort to get parents to teach their own children?

The first very good reason is because that is what children want.

- **“5.6 Research shows that children and young people want to receive their initial sex and relationship education from their parents and families, with school and other adults building on this later.”**

from UK Government's official Sex and Relationship Education Guidance, 2000.

¹ [Alive to the World](#): “Building character for the next generation”: www.alivetotheworld.org/en

This guidance from the UK Government of the year 2000 has just been replaced as “old fashioned”, but children don’t change, and honest research doesn’t either.

The guide goes on to say that parents find it difficult to teach their children, and that is why schools need to step in.

It is true that most parents now expect school sex education and even want it. What’s more, those children who most need help have parents who are least likely to provide it.

So why do parents hang back? It is not that they lack the core knowledge. After all, they are *parents* and the basics, what in England we would call “the birds and bees”, are familiar to any mother or father.

The truth is that:

- Sex is a private subject which touches the centre of who we are, physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- It is natural to shrink from explaining it **but putting the adults’ desire for privacy before that of the child is a false priority.**

Adults can choose to speak or not to speak, but children are exposed without choice.

This is unfair, because children also have a natural sense of modesty and stripping it from them takes away an important protective shield. We know that sex educationalists do this on purpose and to the youngest children for this very reason and to get them to rely on outsiders for advice and support.

I believe that children have a right to hear anything so intimate from their parents. Sex can be a scary subject, and children want to feel safe and loved when they discuss it.

Parents may not be the best informed, they may be awkward about the way they say things, but one thing parents have in common is that they want the best for their children, and they will try to speak the truth.

With school sex education, parents have no control over what may be taught, by whom, or what questions may come up during the class.

There are other reasons why parents are in a special position:

- They alone can communicate sensitive information individually, with love and in the right measure for each child.

I find that when I lead workshops for parents on sex education it rapidly emerges quite how different families are, and even children within a family. The child of a nurse, for instance, can sit back and watch a whole programme on childbirth without blinking, but another child could be frightened for life by that same film.

- Some children mature faster than others.
- Some are more precocious.
- Others are especially sensitive.

- All have an individual readiness to learn.

And as the parents discuss what they do and how their children react it cuts like a knife when I say:

- Do you now see why group sex education classes are so wrong?

Children appear to have an internal sieve when it comes to sex. I remember when I was young I went on half-believing in Father Christmas long after I knew deep down that he didn't exist. And it's the same with sex. Children are quite capable of knowing a certain amount while shutting out the rest. And they are entitled to do exactly that.

The profound influence of parents

When parents speak, they are already thinking ahead to when their child will start going out with members of the other sex, fall in love, and, if it's their vocation, get married. Or the child might have a religious or single vocation. When they talk, parents are looking to the future.

But parents aren't just speaking. Unlike the teacher or school nurse, the parents are there, day by day. If they have opened up communication on this most private of subjects, they are in a much better position to understand their children, to set sensible ground rules for their teenagers, and to be listened to when they give advice.

Because:

- It is profoundly moving to learn for the first time how you came to be from the very person who gave you life.

Children feel it, and parents feel it too, and so the trust between them grows into a more adult friendship, one which will last not only through adolescence but into full maturity and beyond.

It is in the intimacy of explaining sex that parents have a privileged opportunity to pass on their own values. The very fact that it is they who are imparting sexual knowledge assures their children 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 any of us.

By speaking in this intimate way, parents are recognising that their child is emerging as an adult. In a sense it is a rite of passage, opening up trust and friendship between them at a new level on other things as well.

There is no such thing as value-free sex education.

- **In sex education:**
 - **who teaches**
 - **and how they teach****is part of what is taught.**

If parents *don't* open up themselves, their children have every reason to be suspicious of sex, to think that their parents are ashamed of it.

Pornography

I have emphasized so far that a principle reason for engaging parents in sex education is because children want it.

But there is another major reason for fighting for it, which is because it works. When parents are involved in teaching their children, risky behaviours of all sorts diminish.

And how necessary this is with the latest scourge to have hit children: pornography, sexting and online abuse.

In England more compulsory sex education has been forced through supposedly to counter these very things.

But it is parents, not the teachers, who are in the best position to protect their children. It is they who can restrict access to machines, put in filters, monitor their children's friends. Abuse of the media is challenge for all of us, but it is parents who can look their children in the eye, and say:

“Tell me if you see anything weird or creepy. I'm on your side. I can't control you, but I trust you and I want you to be honest with me. Oh, and remember how to press the 'off' button, fast.”

As children get older, schools can support this message, and we do so in *Alive to the World*. But one has to be very careful how it is done. In some secular programmes, the children are actually shown examples of “good” and “bad” porn supposedly to help them choose between the two.

Sometimes parents can use a “bad” situation as a good teaching moment. It may arise from the behaviour of family members/friends which has to be explained, or because a scene in a film that comes upon us by surprise. Using these moments well can be very helpful – lessons the child will value for life.

Single parents

Single parents are understandably among those who find educating their children in sex particularly daunting. A mother alone may not feel comfortable teaching her son, or father his daughter. Add to that that the circumstances of their lives may not give the example that the parents would like to pass on.

Sex educationalists commonly use the difficulties of those from broken homes to bring in their school programmes, but this is unjustified. These children have *more*, not less, need of the best education, and are equally entitled to be taught in an atmosphere of love. Many single parents are very close to their children and can have a passionate desire to save them from the difficulties of their own lives.

There is a beautiful piece in the Vatican's guidance *Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* which says that God sustains single parents with a special love. They may need extra help. Should they wish to delegate their task, this should still be carried out with their authority and in as intimate a manner as circumstances permit.

Being moved by God's design

Many of you here will have been led by your religious beliefs to give importance to respecting sexuality and natural fertility.

However, I believe one can also work the other way round and let the beauty of God's design impact the parents. There are moments in a person's life when they are prepared to learn new things and having to teach one's child is one such. So giving parents the latest science, which many have never encountered before, can have a transforming effect upon them.

This is the reason I wrote my own book: to instruct and hold the hands of parents so that they are in a better position to teach human sexuality according to truth.

*Sexuality Explained*² works from God's design upwards, without mentioning God himself so as to be open to anybody, religious and non-religious alike. It is designed as a tool which parents can use in their own way. I encourage them to read the whole book first, so that the various aspects come together like a puzzle where the whole is greater than the parts.

This is important. I am often asked when parents should begin sex education. The answer is immediately, by preparing themselves. Once they have read and thought about the subject, they will be in a good position to judge when to speak.

The triggers will often come from their children. When they are little, children only want something simple, but it is important always to be truthful. For instance, if a child asks: "Daddy, where do babies come from?" you could answer: "God makes them. He made you and he made me. But he asks us to help him because he wants children to have their own mummy and daddy." You might go on: "He has given parents a very special warm cuddle and sometimes He puts a baby in the mummy's tummy where it grows until it's ready to be born." I don't mention God in my book, but if you wish you can.

Sexuality Explained consists of 10 chapters written in story form which are designed to be shared with the children over a number of years, from pre-puberty into adolescence. The parents can read the chapters aloud with their children, taking the work out of doing so and giving them the biological drawings they need to explain both female and male fertility. They may prefer to speak in their own words or give a chapter to read on their own, which can work well with older children.

Sex education is not a one-off thing. You will be building up a child's knowledge gradually. In deciding when to explain what, parents need to take account of their child's maturity, but also what is taught at school, who their friends are and the other influences upon them, including the media. It's obviously important to begin first lessons before puberty. Sadly, parents are now finding that outside influences, especially the school, are forcing them to begin earlier than they otherwise would. It is a good idea to cover whatever may be taught at school beforehand, and/or to follow up on it.

Because the text is written as a conversation between a mother and her daughter, the father and his son, moral questions appear among the biological ones. These then act as a trigger for live conversations between parents and children.

I have designed the book to model how these conversations might start. Sometimes it is convenient to be able to speak in a car, when you don't have to look at each other. Sometimes, you may be doing

² *Sexuality Explained: a Guide for Parents and Children*, by Louise Kirk (Gracewing, 2013).
<http://www.gracewing.co.uk/page454.html>

something together – I have chosen baking cakes and going fishing. Sometimes, you will need pencil and paper, in which case you will want to be near a table. Always, it is necessary to spend enough time alone with each of your children to allow such conversations to spring up in a natural way.

The book is now being translated into other languages and forms a complement to the Alive to the World programme.

Transcendental foundations

What I found is that the fertility of the body is so balanced and beautiful that you need only three transcendental keys and other moral questions, including the importance of marriage, flow from them.

- The **first key** is the worth of every human person, from conception.

This isn't difficult to teach. Have you ever met a child who didn't think he was important?

When a child looks at the baby in the womb, he is not thinking, "Those are the inconvenient products of conception". He's thinking: "That was me!"

- The **second key** is to accept that the body speaks truly of who we are.

Healthy children know very well that boys are boys and girls are girls, and are not fooled by the thought that men and women are interchangeable. Explaining their distinct reproductive systems helps to give a firm foundation to their sense of sexual identity. You can tell them that each cell of their bodies is marked with either male or female DNA. In fact, science is telling us what experience has long made clear, which is that men and women are very different from each other and that the sexes are designed to be complementary and interdependent not only in their bodies, but also in their spirits, minds and emotions.

We as Christians have been slow to speak of this and in our silence have allowed the subject to become increasingly controversial. The longer we remain silent, the more controversial it becomes.

Fr Paul Check, whose work among those suffering from same-sex attraction is well known, points out homosexuality is not primarily about sex but about poor self-identity.

- The **third key** is to accept that the ova and the sperm are also precious and should be treated with dignity.

When you describe to a child how out of so many of her mother's eggs and father's sperm she came to be, with all the characteristics inherited from both sides of the family, it isn't difficult to create a sense of awe. And it is this sense of wonder that I have tried to keep throughout the book.

Following the path of the gametes is a very good way of demonstrating when a sexual act is or isn't appropriate. The life-giving properties of the sperm and egg symbolise why the full sexual act belongs only to marriage and why openness to life should be part of every sexual act. Masturbation turns the sexual act back on itself and is always wrong. Homosexual acts likewise fail to offer the sperm to the egg. So too does mutual masturbation or oral sex.

Sexual bonding and the mucus cycle

Studying the sexual chemistry of the brain backs up the seriousness of sex by explaining how sexual bonding happens in a physical way in our brains. Sex is designed to be the language of the whole person, and it points towards the full marital act. If you become physically intimate too young or too easily you can get drawn into sexual situations which are out of kilter with the permanence of your relationship and can weaken your ability to bond with a spouse later on.

You will see that there is a lot to teach, and much of it is not currently taught at school, in England at least.

I have been shocked by errors I have found, even in Catholic textbooks. It is not only the misinformation which is unfair to children, but also what is left out. It is astonishing, for instance, that in England at least, the mucus cycle is regularly omitted.

In fact, children are emerging from sex education with so little real knowledge and such unrealistic ideas about postponing childbearing that even some government bodies – and our infertility industry – are becoming concerned.

Fathers as teachers

A frequent question I'm asked is if it matters if fathers won't get involved in sex education. Mothers tend to find it easier – they will anyway be preparing their daughters for menstruation and will probably speak to their sons about hygiene and dress and social manners. All that is part of being a mother.

If necessary, the mother can take over and explain sperm production and the female reproductive cycle. My book has chapters designed specifically for boys with a father's voice speaking so that these convey a male presence even if the father is absent.

But there are some things that only a man can tell a boy and that is about the affective aspects of sexuality, of the temptations, joys and struggles specifically of being a man. In what I'm now saying I borrow from Dr Pat Fagan³, who speaks on this subject with passion.

One of the untruths of secular sex education is that men and women, boys and girls approach sexual relations in the same way. In fact, as Karol Woytyla pointed out in his book *Love and Responsibility*, boys are much more quickly aroused while girls look to sex first and foremost for love and emotional security. It's well known that in the hook-up culture boys will commonly cut ties with the girls they have had light sex with, while the girls gaze at their phones waiting for a message. Many a young girl has lamented "Why did nobody tell me that sex isn't love?"

So what are boys meant to do with the long years of adolescence and early adulthood when the testosterone flows but marriage is inappropriate? Speaking of abstinence is hardly inspiring – and in any case one abstains from things one is otherwise entitled to. What Pat Fagan points out is that, far from being idle years, this is a necessary period in a boy's life when he learns the self-control to become the best possible husband to his future wife. As St John Paul teaches, we need to be in

³ Dr Patrick Fagan, founder of the [Marriage and Religion Research Institute](https://marri.us/) (MARRI). See his blog for articles on this subject. <https://marri.us/>

possession of ourselves first before we can give ourselves to another and this includes the physical act of sex. Even in marriage, a man is more easily aroused than his wife, and it is by learning self-control that he prepares for the periodic abstinence that natural family planning demands. More than that, he prepares to court his wife in such a way that he is able to bring her to sexual climax alongside himself. Thus he becomes the best possible lover.

It is only a father who can talk about these things to his son, and about the temptations and the struggles which he can expect to meet on the way. A father can also show his son how to use his sexual energy to become the best possible man in other ways, by being adventurous, striving to do well in his studies and in his career, and generally adding to his social capital so that he becomes a desirable man with a choice of girls to court.

Fathers also have an invaluable role with their daughters. It is said that as they grow up girls look to men to be affirmed in their own sense of identity and sexual attraction. This is why even intelligent girls can be duped by evil men who con them with the sense of assurance they seek. A girl whose father gives her that self-confidence, who takes an interest in her physical as well as her intellectual and emotional development, and knows how to compliment as well as to stretch her, is much less vulnerable.

Both parents have a role in giving their children advice on their boyfriends and girlfriends and pointing out that we only have one sexual life. Every action that young people take should be directed towards finding and cherishing their future spouse, or any other vocation to which God might call them.

Conclusion

The golden opportunities for talking become fewer as children grow older. Parents themselves can then trespass upon their privacy. What is sure is that it is those parents who have already established an open dialogue with their children who are most likely to be listened to in the crucial years of young adulthood and beyond.

I began by saying that a principle reason for getting parents to teach their own children is because that is what children want. It has been found to work well – where parents are involved, negative behaviours of all sorts have been found to diminish. But I want to emphasise in finishing is that parents learn a lot from the teaching process. In an age where too few adults understand the latest science of fertility, getting them to teach their children is a way to reach out to them as well and to evangelise our communities.

In this of all subjects, it is anyway a mistake to teach the young and leave their parents behind. My own NFP teacher tried it, giving lessons to teenagers at school. She said that the parents at home rapidly undid everything she taught, advising their children not to listen and use the Pill.

There are many funny moments teaching a child, and the lessons are not all one way. Teaching sexuality really does open up new and precious bonds of trust and friendship within the family, and it is up to us to encourage many more people to enjoy them.

Thank you.

