

Sex Ed 101

What Parents Need to Know

Leaving sex education to the discretion of public schools is not a wise option for many Christian parents. Our writer explores the dangers, and what Christian parents can do about them.

By Alex Newman

The day I handed my son, then in Grade 4, a Christian book about sex, he took one look at it, said “Ewwww!” and handed it back. Lamely suggesting he ask questions when he felt like it, I beat a hasty retreat. And in doing so, made the same mistake as countless parents, Christian and otherwise.

“Parents who wait until kids ask will never get the opportunity to talk,” says Paul Robertson, youth culture specialist for Youth Unlimited (formerly Toronto Youth for Christ), “because the world’s pop culture has already answered their questions – through media, peers and even schools.”

Youth Unlimited worker Marianne Deeks, who works at a high school in Stouffville, Ont., says teens in the town of 8,000 just outside the Greater Toronto Area tell her sex is “no big deal” and virginity is something to shed as quickly as possible. She recently heard about two Grade 10 students getting caught in a school washroom having sex. At another school a group of older girls pimped some of the younger girls out on a school field – for \$5 for oral sex.

Pointing to the buffet of sexual imagery that children are fed daily via TV, films, books, the Internet and advertising, most public educators argue in favour of an increasingly graphic sex education curriculum geared to increasingly younger grades. They want to give kids the right information.

But for some the current school curriculum, in province after province, is simply too much information. When sex

ed was first introduced in schools in 1966 in Grade 9, it covered body parts and the broad brushstrokes of intercourse – with line drawings. Today’s curriculum, as recently proposed in Ontario, covers sexual orientation in Grade 3, masturbation in Grade 6 and oral and anal sex in Grades 7 and 8. And it’s caused some groups to react strongly to what they perceive as the “normalization of certain behaviours,” says Faye Sonier, legal counsel at The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).

British Columbia public health nurse Meg Hickling – an author, sex educator and a Christian – argues that for schools to avoid discussing all kinds of sex until kids become teenagers is “downright dangerous.” There’s so much bad information out there via porn, the media and peers, she says, that children desperately need the “right information. Teenagers engage in oral or anal sex to prevent pregnancy. But they have no clue about the dangers. HPV is a virus you can carry for life, and [is] the leading cause of throat cancer and mouth cancer.”

Even schools that discuss “everything” don’t necessarily

Not only do parents have a responsibility to talk, but research shows kids actually listen





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outline the dangers, says Deeks, the Stouffville youth worker. “Consequences are not part of the curriculum, though many teachers would like them to be.” Deeks isn’t just referring to the physical dangers, but the emotional ones as well. In a Sex Without Rules seminar she offers to teens, Deeks discusses how the brain is impacted by sexual be-

haviour. “Teenagers aren’t told that every time a person is sexually active, the chemicals in their brain attach [them] to the person they’re with.”

Hickling is in favour of telling teens all there is to know about sex, but she couples it with her definition of sexual readiness – when you’re an adult, and not just the legal age of 19, but living on your own and paying your own way. Hickling says that the best-informed youth tend to delay sexual activity.

Paul Robertson’s concern, even though he understands the good information argument, is that some parts of the curriculum are “seed sowing, and not in a good way. The child’s mind is a fertile one, and [the] curriculum often takes children to issues they do not really understand and oftentimes are very uncomfortable with. Problem is, nobody wants to talk right and wrong, or about healthy sexual perspectives, especially if it’s Christian.”

The alternative – teaching abstinence only – doesn’t sit well even with some Christian educators. Though research suggests that kids taking abstinence pledges delay sex, when they break the pledge – which 88 per cent of them reportedly do – they do so without preparation. Teaching that “You are best to not have sex, but if you do, use a condom,” is not a confusing message to teenagers, argues Sabrina Weill, former editor of *Seventeen Magazine*, who interviewed thousands of teens for her book *The Real Truth about Teens & Sex* (Penguin, 2005). In fact, most teens wish they got more information

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How Churches Can Help

Youth workers often report getting “flak” from parents for introducing the idea of sex talks, but maybe there’s a role for churches to teach **parents** to do the talking.

Bendale Bible Chapel in Scarborough, Ont., started a workshop in 2006, inviting parents and their children in Grades 5 to 8. They start with a humorous video clip, like Tim Allen of *Home Improvement* trying to talk to his son Brad about sex using a car analogy. They engage parents and children in discussion starters to promote a comfortable atmosphere.

Afterward, youth minister Cindy Westacott takes the girls and moms, and her husband, Pastor Dean Westacott, takes the dads and boys (and occasionally women who have to take on dad’s role for whatever reason). Cindy talks body changes and babies, and Dean covers body changes and plumbing. Then they gather back together to discuss relationships and purity from a biblical perspective.

At that point they dispel myths, such as the untruth that “all teens are having sex.” And they lay out the truth about emotions in a physical relationship. “Marriage is something to be respected, and sex is meant to be fun within the context of marriage.” FT

about both abstinence and contraception.

So, what’s a parent to do? Faye Sonier, legal counsel with the EFC, says “parents have been forced to really dig to find out what’s [being taught in school]. The process itself is inconsistent with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (to which Canada is a party) which states that parents have a prior right over the education of their

children. If parents can’t figure out what’s in the curriculum, it limits the action they can take.”

It’s not just Christian parents who are concerned. Ninety per cent of parents who were polled in British Columbia said they were not comfortable with someone from Planned Parenthood teaching their children about oral and anal sex in Grades 7 and 8; and 85 per cent were uncomfortable with children in kindergarten to Grade 3 learning the technical aspects of intercourse.

Many parents have joined groups to lobby government, with some success, such as the recent postponement of Ontario’s proposed extra-explicit curriculum after a parental outcry.

But there are plenty of others who believe that a parent’s energy is better spent communicating their own hopes, values, and expectations to their children in order to combat what the kids are learning in the culture.

“The school is going to teach a lot of things that aren’t from a Christian worldview. Welcome to the real world,” says Cindy Westacott, youth minister for Bendale Bible Chapel in Scarborough, Ont.

“When families are connected, it’s easier to safeguard kids by telling them why our holy God wants them to be pure, why it’s good for them,” she adds. “But a teen with no moral compass and looking for love ends up in the wrong places,” with little to prevent sexual experimentation.

Although Westacott is completely aware of the temptations that await our children and youth, she does believe that abstinence is possible. She and her husband Dean, Bendale’s pastor, hold a workshop for parents and teens to discuss sex and purity. Their own three sons (two of whom married their first and only girlfriends) were taught about

New Resources on Education

A new resource about parental rights in Canadian education systems, and another about Ontario’s sex education curriculum, are the leading edge of a series being released this fall by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).

The series aims to assist parents and students. It responds to the most frequent and important inquiries received on this topic by the EFC’s Centre for Faith and Public Life, based in Ottawa. The documents are freely available at the EFC.ca/education.

The first published item in this EFC Back to School Blitz is titled *Questions and (Some) Answers in Regard to Ontario’s Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Sex Ed Component)*. The curriculum in question, which was both introduced and pulled last spring surrounded

by a media firestorm, left many parents upset, worried and confused.

Although the issue is no longer headline news, the curriculum in use for this fall is only an interim edition and will probably be revised. This Q & A sheet answers eight of the most frequently asked questions, in order to inform parents and enable them to engage proactively on this issue.

In September the EFC also released an open letter to the Ontario Minister of Education on the topic. It is accompanied by a general version of the letter that Ontario parents can modify and send under their own signature to the minister, the deputy minister, their member of provincial parliament and the official education critic.

God's holiness and His expectations for marriage from a very early age. But, as Westcott says, the talking has to be ongoing and encouraging.

The research bears this out – not only that parents have a responsibility to talk, but that kids actually listen. Sabrina Weill's survey revealed that 45 per cent of teens admitted their parents had the biggest influence on their sexual activity, with a mere 5 per cent influenced by sex educators. What's more, the greater the attachment to parents, the more important those values are.

Weill adds that parents needn't go into a big song and dance about their views – in fact, "a few-sentence exchange can have more impact. The point is to talk – they're getting hundreds of messages a day about sex, and if it's not talked about at home, those are the only messages they're getting."

Parents being silent about sex "is as good as a permission slip," claims Paul Robertson. Even when the talk elicits eye rolling – and it usually does, he says – "kids never close their ears. And if you don't speak into their lives, [popular culture] will."

For Catherine and John Byl of Ancaster, Ont., talking to their four children as they grew up wasn't just about ensuring they received a healthy Christian understanding of human sexuality. It was also about fostering closeness as a family. Being very open and communicating well builds strong family bonds, Catherine says.

If children know your familial love, modelled after Christ's love, she says, then they understand that "sexuality is a gift from God, and that His plan is to enjoy that gift of sex – within marriage."

One caveat the Byls add is to gauge your child's age

Recommended Reading

- *The New Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It* by Meg Hickling (Northstone, 2005).
- *Boys, Girls & Body Science: A First Book About Facts of Life* by Meg Hickling and Kim La Fave (Harbour, 2002). FT

and emotional readiness. "We don't want to rob children of their childhood," says John, a professor at Redeemer University College who teaches student teachers. "They need to learn about life and its challenges, and how they can live in a responsible, joyful, God-fearing way; but they are children and should be given lots of mental and physical space to freely play without being burdened by adult concerns."

The Byls started by talking about God's plans for life by looking at plants growing from seeds in Grade 1. "As they get older, make it more specific."

Cindy Westcott adds that parents having dinner regularly with their children has a positive effect on all kinds of behaviour, including the delay of sexual activity. And when it came time for more serious and frank conversation about sex, the Westcotts made it special. When each of their three boys graduated from Grade 5, Dean took him out for dinner and a baseball game, they stayed at a hotel, had breakfast out, and he talked with him about sex, purity, holiness and marriage from a Christian perspective.

As for my son who said "Ewwwww," he is now 17 and has a girlfriend. Thankfully, we are working at talking about emotions, sex, responsibility for others' needs, and especially for God's desires for holiness. FT

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The guide about parental rights and religious freedom in the classroom is titled *Hands Up! Identifying Parents' Rights in the Educational System*. It is a thorough but concise introductory guide to the rights and responsibilities of parents, children and government in the educational context.

Hands Up! addresses contested issues such as the parental right to educate, religion in public schools, the role of tolerance in the decisions of school boards, and the rights of religious schools and organizations. It includes a brief primer on religious freedom generally and education law in Canada.

The EFC has not forgotten the young adults at universities and colleges who are taking a pro-life stand or speaking out on other beliefs. At press time it was preparing a handbook for pro-life students and clubs.

Over the last several decades there have been at-

tempts to limit the rights of speech, association, and religion of pro-life students. The handbook examines that history and current trends. It also introduces, in layman's terms, the legal implications of various courses of action that such students may consider, and offers recommendations to help them avoid unnecessary difficulties and challenges.

"These resources," explains the EFC's Faye Sonier, "should further equip parents and students as they face challenges, and give them the confidence to break new ground and take strategic, proactive action." Sonier, who works as legal counsel at the EFC's Centre for Faith and Public Life, encourages parents who may be facing a challenge or difficulty in their school to contact legal staff at the EFC.

To view and download these free-of-charge resources, visit theEFC.ca/education. FT –BILL FLEDDERUS