

'...mum and dad having special cuddles'

Miro Martin blames prudish Anglo culture for educators' hesitant approach to sex education

Anne Mitchell and Jenny Walsh (see page 2 this issue) have put forward a valid case for a national approach to sex education. Children today are far more sexually aware than in the past and at a much younger age.

We have alarming statistics regarding STIs, teenage pregnancies and unacceptable incidences of sexual abuse and harassment at home and in the workplace. So, why is it that sex education is so poorly addressed in Australia? I believe that our culture is largely to blame. Even though we live in a multi-cultural society, I believe our school values are still mainly Anglo values. As a result, we are still very prudish when it comes to sex. Sex is a taboo subject, especially when it comes to discussing it with children.

It's natural to be curious

At the end of last term, I had to speak to a couple of eight-year-olds who had been exploring each other's genitalia. This is not uncommon and, in most cases, it's just normal childish curiosity. Unfortunately, children touching each other can also be an indication that they are being abused or have witnessed abuse.

When I spoke to the children they referred to their 'private parts' and 'rude parts.' I set them straight by calling their genitals by their proper names, 'penis and vagina.' The next day I copped it from an angry mother. How dare I use such profane language with her child! She was going to see my supervisor to complain and demand that I expel the boy who had looked at her daughter's 'rude bit'. The team approach mentioned by Mitchell and Walsh is a long way off when you are dealing with parents like this.

Euphemisms

I suspect that most parents think it is proper to use correct sexual terminology, but I often detect a wince similar to the sensation of a dentist hitting a nerve whenever I do use the terms with them or their children. Adults are guilty of giving children the wrong idea about sex. It's rude. It's only for grown ups. You're too young to know. Babies are a gift of love from God... or worst of all "...the stork brings the babies."

We have made sex a fairy tale like Santa and the tooth fairy. We either try to protect our children by making up euphemisms or avoid giving them answers altogether. How many of us



have heard descriptions or stories about "daddy driving his train into the tunnel" or about "mum and dad having special cuddles?"

Alternatively, we trivialise sex by joking about it. It is unfortunate that, in some settings, sex is something dirty or profane. Swearing is linked to sex. In a previous article I mentioned the American comedian, Lenny Bruce. He couldn't understand why being told to "get f@#*" by someone was an insult. He argued that having sex was nice and we should treat such an appellation as a complement similar to "have a nice day." We should reply by saying: "...thank you. I'll ring my wife and ask her." I have used this approach with many parents during my career. However, I suggest that if you do adopt this retort you should first learn to fight or be able to run fast!

Matter of fact Maoris

My rule of thumb is, if children are old enough to ask the question, they're old enough for the answer. I am certain that parents and teachers can have first crack at the children and give them the correct information before they hear it from

their ill-informed friends on the playground or from those who are extremely skilled at giving children misinformation – paedophiles and those who would harm our children.

I was fortunate to spend seven years in New Zealand, much of the time with Maori students. Maori have a matter-of-fact attitude towards sex. It is simply a part of life like eating and sleeping.

All over New Zealand, Maori carvings unashamedly display ancestors with their vaginas and penises. They are parts of the body. Fertility and the ability to perpetuate the family are what life is all about. The Maori children I met didn't have the hang-ups that Anglo children and their parents have.

A national curriculum

There is a definite need to provide sex education to our children and, like most other areas of education, a team approach is required between home and school. To be successful, a national curriculum would need compliance and consistency from all schools. This is going to be

a major challenge and will involve some head butting with the religious schools.

For example, my whole career has been in Catholic education and I know there is a moral dilemma when it comes to topics such as contraception. Protection is OK to prevent disease, but not for preventing pregnancy. Catholics believe that intercourse should only occur in heterosexual marriage and nowhere else and solely for the purpose of procreation. Masturbation is a definite 'no-no'.

In reality, we know that our children (even those who go to religious schools) will grow up and have sex outside of marriage and that many will be in homosexual relationships. Almost all of them will masturbate. If the curriculum is going to be authentic, i.e. prepare our children for life in the real world, these issues will need to be addressed. A national curriculum would need to look at sexual health for the whole of society and would need to take into account the reality of what actually happens and the values of the many religious schools that have conflicting opinions about what is normal and what is aberrant behaviour.

Outside of the religious paradigm, there are issues such as homosexuality that would polarise even the non-religious. If we discuss this openly and honestly with our children it won't be just the religious schools we'll butt heads with. Children should be given the opportunity to learn about and discuss the mores and beliefs of various religions and sectors of society and be taught to respect these beliefs even if they disagree with them.

One thing I really appreciate about the Catholic school setting is that we make the children aware of the procreative destiny of their sexuality. Sex is not about gratification, although there is nothing wrong with pleasure. Entering into a sexual relationship involves a

commitment, especially when children may arise from that relationship.

Holistic sex education

I like the idea of holistic sexual health education. The WHO's definition of sexual health, mentioned by Mitchell and Walsh, refers to physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. This starts from day one. Even in prep we can teach children about the functions of their various body parts and explain what is appropriate and inappropriate. For example, a doctor can touch their genitals if mum or dad is present. Mum or dad may need to bathe them. As the children get older they can be made aware of issues such as gender bias, harassment, relationships, sexuality, etc.

What are you going to tell a child when they ask what the two dogs are doing in the park? A five-year-old may not ask and, if they do, a simple straightforward explanation may be enough to satisfy their curiosity. "They are mating, or making babies." That would probably be the end of it for a five-year-old. An eight-year-old may ask a few more questions. In this instance you would give more information. A 10-year-old would probably already know and wouldn't be asking you. In any case, it's important that you give a correct answer and not postpone or avoid discussing the issue. If they are genuinely curious and you don't tell them they'll go elsewhere, as I mentioned earlier.

We can give them role models for healthy sexual discussion and behaviour by being honest and matter-of-fact with our comments and by not giggling sheepishly like someone who has been caught out farting at a dinner party every time we have to mention sex.

I propose a very open and matter-of-fact approach to sex education. This doesn't happen in reality, even in my school. We are all increasingly aware of political correctness and of the ever present threat of litigation. I'm not sure we are prudish as much as simply scared of offending someone and being sued. This is why schools avoid sex education. The lack of guidelines doesn't help either. I really like the notion of a national curriculum. Teachers would welcome it. I just hope that the curriculum planners take more notice of the real needs of our children ahead of political correctness and give us a document that is relevant to real life and not watered down with euphemisms and platitudes for fear of offending someone's sensitivity.



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