

Teaching Children the Facts of Life

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Last year, I had a dream. I had managed to get to Madrid and I wanted to come to Sydney. It was an impossible dream for me, all the way from the UK, but here I am, not only here, but on a platform and invited to speak to you. My thanks to the organisers are heartfelt.

My subject appears a straightforward one, teaching children the facts of life, but in a sense it encompasses everything we have talked about at this Congress – What are the true Facts of Life AND how do we pass them on to the next generation. Call it sex education, and it may have been what drew you to the Congress.

We know it is a battleground. It was as a mother, and a school governor, fighting to protect her young, that I became involved. I was shocked, horrified, by the sex education materials being forced into English schools. It wasn't just their diabolical morals; it was their straight biological inaccuracy.

Even in my son's science book, approved for use in the best private schools, the chapter on human reproduction was downright wrong.

The first instinct of alert parents is to protest the school programme, to take their children out and to educate them instead at home, perhaps even to home school. It is self-evident that parents are the natural educators of their children in this delicate topic. Even governments, certainly in the UK, admit this. Our official guidelines, more offended against than followed, say that parents should be the main educators, and schools come in behind to assist them.

Yet you, who take your children out, will be among the determined minority. Most parents do not, and many even want the schools to do the teaching. We have to reverse this. I would even say that one overall measure of this Congress's success will be how it has impacted upon sex education, getting the wrong sort out, and the right into parents' hands to teach in the privacy of their own homes.

I wonder if you have ever questioned why it is that rabid sex education is in our schools in the first place? I don't mean why the providers pushed it – Miriam Grossman has admirably described their ideological and commercial interests, which are the same in Australia as they are in the UK or in any country of the world because they are internationally orchestrated. I mean why it is that parents have succumbed to it. Because, if we don't understand the parents, we will never know how to win them to our side.

I discovered an answer round my school governors' table. It is that many parents, and grandparents, were never taught sex properly themselves. Many years later,

sometimes sixty years later, those same people spill over with the hurt of their adolescent selves. They mind bitterly that they were never taught about growing up. Some blame their life's course on that lack.

For people such as these, school sex education, of any kind, is better than none. If you ask them if they went on to teach their own children, they will often look a bit nonplussed and say, well no. "The school knows better than me." And as likely as not they turn a blind eye to what is being taught.

To be fair, even determined parents can find sex hard to approach. It's not that we don't know the facts of life – after all, we are parents. Nor is it that we don't know our children. We know them better than anybody else. Nor is it even that sex is an unmentionable word. It springs out of every magazine or bill board. But to bring them together, sex, the facts and the children, is something we shrink from.

I was amazed when teachers told me that a constant trickle of children even today have a first period at school with no prior warning.

You see, sex is a modest subject. That's why we avoid teaching it, and why, broadly speaking, it hasn't been adequately taught for generations. Single parents, and those who, for whatever reason, feel uncomfortable with their sexual history, are the most likely to pass the duty blindfold to schools. And so we have the position that the children who are most vulnerable, who most need the warm assurance that sex is nothing to be frightened, and that marriage is a realistic option, are the least likely to hear it.

What are we to do? We can't ignore the problem and, like everybody else, be too frightened to teach marriage. Nor, in my view, can we put confidence in school sex education and its reformation. For a start, current providers are not going to be easily ousted. There are too many commercial, as well as ideological, interests at stake. And in many countries the freedom of schools to teach marriage and chastity and family life is being rapidly eroded. In the UK, same-sex marriage looms as a very real threat.

But there is another reason for enlisting parents. They really are the best educators, with the most influence. Their children turn to them naturally, as they do with anything that is personal and important, and the children have a right to loving advice, at the right moment, with the words that are necessary. Their parents, too, are the only people likely to be around when they make their sexual decisions. What many mothers and fathers find is that, by opening up on sex, they establish themselves as their children's chief mentors on other subjects too.

How, then, are we to get parents, who would rather not, teach what they have not practised: marriage, respect for fertility, and all the other ingredients of true sexual education which your average parent neither knows nor follows? You can't start with religion, because that means nothing to many, and frightens many others. Nor can you rely on films, because even in the home this would give a one-size-fits-all approach which can be so damaging.

We do, however, have other powerful assets. Miriam Grossman spoke of our secret weapon, the twenty-first century science of the brain. Now that we know that sexual encounters really do create permanent chemical bonding, and that the adolescent brain only comes together for mature decision-making in the mid-twenties, the premises on which standard sex education is based can be out-flanked. Add to this the science of fertility, ably described this morning by Lynne Anderson, and we know that contraception is unnecessary for family planning. God's creation will not be outdone, as Ken Duncan showed us so magnificently in his slides: the beauty of creation speaks to the heart, and its truth is compelling.

The task, then, is to capture the latest science and the truth of the body in such a way that it encourages parents to stop and think again. John Anderson mentioned points of traction when we can reach out to others and bring them round to our way of thinking. I think parents are just such a target population. It is natural for them to want the best for their children and to teach them the truth, if only they can be enticed to take interest in the first place.

My answer has been to write a book. To arrest the imagination, and get below the visors of those who are naturally sensitive, I have told stories, a device I took from the [Alive to the World](#) character development programme – I am its UK Co-ordinator, and my book is designed to complement it, using the same conversational style which makes facts easy to remember and throws up all sorts of points for discussion.

I begin from biology, including details which will be new to many readers and so intrigue them. All the facts given are couched in terms designed to inspire reverence, and to show that our sexuality is a beautiful gift, but a fragile one: it is no toy to be played with. My descriptions are accompanied by lively diagrams which Jessie Gillick based on Dr Thomas Hilgers' NFP originals.

You see, we often look at the obstacles and ignore the strengths of our position. Whatever their own lives, few parents can resist finding out more about anything which affects their children. This is especially so when presented in a palatable fashion which reveals rather than preaches. And there is so much to learn. I spoke before about the basic "facts of life", which everybody knows, but now I am speaking of the science we learn at a Congress like this, of how the bodies of men and women have been designed to collaborate so remarkably together, and how this closeness corresponds with sound spiritual and social values which, when pointed out, make common sense. By the time you reach chapter ten, a whole picture of our integrated selves emerges which can be shown to come together most satisfyingly in lived celibacy or marriage.

There is another bonus to using stories, which is that they give parents help at the level that's wanted. Some will read the book, and speak to their children in their own words. For them, each chapter ends with a **framework of points** and a **glossary**. There are also **whole page diagrams** which can be cut out and arranged in any order. Other parents will want to read the chapters with their children as they stand. This makes life very easy and takes away from embarrassment. Still others will hand the book to their children to read on their own.

[Sexuality Explained: a Guide for Parents and Children](#) only came out on 1 March but there is already a buzz about it. I have had a single father delighted to see his son pick it up, knowing that it would teach what he himself couldn't. I have had a group of mothers open-eared when I told them that the Pill is a 'Sixties idea, unnecessary and out-of-date. They each bought a copy. An unexpected market has been among twenty-year-olds, learning for the first time many things which school sex education never taught them.

I should put in as an aside here that of course we shall continue to rely, as we always have, upon good teachers filling in and picking up the pieces where parents fail to perform their role. The well-being of individual children is always more important than sticking to any one method. However, the case of the vulnerable should equally not stop us developing the best norms for the majority of families, families which have been sorely let down in recent years.

In practice, all pupils are going to be moulded to some extent by the culture of their school. We will never change society by relying upon individual parents happening upon a book. What I am hoping is to work through schools and parishes, asking them to promote the book to parents and to work with them, supporting them in its use. There is a lot of material there which can also be adapted for group discussion among older children. I am already getting bites from teachers who would be interested in developing this.

Once you have a pool of children being taught in like fashion, you can begin to change a community. And one successful community can draw in others. Ideally, you will combine sex education with the most effective values and relationships education I know, the [Alive to the World](#) character programme, to strengthen them in virtue. These attractive texts for ages 8 to 13 are also available on our stand and I hope that you will go and look at them. Form the next generation in the logic of all aspects of virtue and we will begin to change the world.

Leaders in this new combined education will need to be people of hope. They will need to be determined, because the task ahead is enormous. After all, we're attempting to turn round not a cruiser but a super tanker heading in the wrong direction. They will need to be inspired and never give up. In short, the people we need are people like you.

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