

UNDERSTANDING THE GIFT: THE PARENTS' ROLE

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and Teachers

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Louise Kirk has been campaigning to uphold family values since her marriage. Asked to speak on *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* when it was published in 1995, she has been trying to help implement the guidelines ever since. As a school governor and with her background in Natural Family Planning, noticed the inaccuracy of many sex education materials. As an alternative, she took up an invitation to bring *Alive to the World* to the UK, a character programme which embodies Catholic principles without being religious. Her new book, *Sexuality Explained*, complements it, and is designed to help parents educate their own children in the biological and moral truths of their sexuality.

Understanding the Gift: the Parents' Role

by Louise Kirk

Fr Jay is a difficult act to follow, but he also makes my task easy. He has given us, one after another, convincing arguments to show that our Church's teaching is something we can be proud of, and that it is also very practical.

If I heard a rustle in the seats, it might be from those thinking: it's all very well for children from good homes with well motivated parents. What does one do for those many other children who come from broken homes, who have parents who neglect them, or, indeed, parents who are well-meaning enough, but have no intention of following the Church's teaching themselves or of passing it on to their children? Do we leave these to one side? And might it not be cruel to abandon girls who we know are being preyed upon both in and outside school without giving them the contraceptive advice which might at least protect them from untimely pregnancy and STDs?

These are big questions for all of us in this room, parents and teachers alike. And so it is with relief that I turn to the Church's specific guidance on educating the young. You can find it in the Catechism, and in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. But it is also neatly summarized in our Chairman's sex education policy for Salford diocese.

1. Both Church and State recognise that parents are the first and best educators of their children.
2. Parents and carers are always to play the central role in sex education, with schools working with them in partnership.
3. No sex education should ever offend against the modesty, delicacy or sense of privacy of the young.
4. Because each child is a unique and unrepeatable person, his/her dignity *demands* individual formation in which parents play the primary role.
5. Parents are given the wherewithal to perform their role because of the love they bear their child, and because of the grace conferred on them in the sacrament of marriage.
6. Catholic teaching on marriage and human sexuality is not simply about imparting information but should always involves growth
 - ≡ in developing a properly formed conscience
 - ≡ in giving young people the strength of character to lead a life of chastity
 - ≡ in giving them the courage to love God's plan for human sexuality.

Above all, the policy makes clear that all teaching on personal relationships and sex education in a Catholic school should have as its goal remote preparation for lasting marriage.

So why is it that both Church and State recognise that parents are the first and best educators of their children on intimate matters while in practice school sex education has become the norm?

The answer is that school sex education was introduced not at the request of parents, or at the behest of schools, but by government. It was to be used as a tool with a specific aim, an aim very different from what we have been talking about so far. School sex education was dreamt up in the UK by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (doctors, please note, not teachers) who persuaded the government that a combination of easy access to contraception, and the sex education which would prepare children to use it, would solve the problem of unwanted pregnancies. It was an idea first put forward by the RCOG in a report of 1972 (after which free contraception on the NHS was also introduced) and again in 1991. Since then, further government-sponsored reports, such as that of the Social Exclusion Unit of 1999 and the McDonald review of 2009, have taken the link for granted, and the ideas contained in them have seeped through into the rest of society.

Now it isn't surprising that those of us who are interested in preparing children for lifelong marriage are going to have a very different approach to sex education to those whose chief aim is to teach 'safe sex' and contraception. The one protects children's modesty as part of the armoury of chastity; the other encourages the young to be open about sex, and to name private parts in public. The one emphasises family relationships and the nurturing of individuals; the other teaches children to trust strangers and subjects them to class lessons, with all the group dynamics that such an embarrassing subject involves. Children are in addition treated as though they are all prone to early sexual experimentation (which is far from the case) and as such they are exposed to films which horrify adults.

You see, the sex educationalists have a problem. School sex education has been going on now in our country for the past forty years, and the results have been dismal. Instead of admitting defeat and abandoning the experiment, their reaction has been to give children more of the same, and at an ever younger age. Early recognition of the sexual organs, however, does nothing to help teenagers remember their pills. Risk compensation also come into play: because they believe themselves to be protected, young people will indulge in more risky behaviour. Most girls who become pregnant not only know about contraception, but are on it or have used it. However, it is not news that children are stubborn. We all know how difficult it is to get them to do something regularly even when they have no objection to it. But when they don't like it – and nobody likes using contraception – it's well nigh impossible. The failure rates when children use condoms and pills are hugely higher than those for the adult population.

Many of us are horrified by the lack of morals in the sex education programmes pressed upon schools. Just the other day a teacher friend of mine told me that a class of Year 9s – 13-year-olds – were being given not cucumbers, but plastic penises to stick their condoms on, complete with integral soap ejectors. However, for all the protests about

the amoral content of much school sex education, few people notice the sheer factual inaccuracy and datedness of much that is taught. The chapter on human reproduction in my son's science book, for instance, was riddled with error, and my daughter, first at school and now at university, finds herself surrounded by girls puzzled by their own menstrual cycles and asking her for explanations.

Do these lapses matter? Well, for a start you have simple justice. It is unfair to girls that they should be left disturbed by the ordinary workings of their bodies. A doctor who worked for many years in a sexual health clinic told me that he regularly had girls calling there simply because they were worried by seeing mucus. The Church has repeatedly said, most recently through Pope Benedict, that all of us have a right to understand fertility. Understanding our nature helps us to treat it with respect, and it underpins our understanding of God's intentions. It is fundamental to appreciating John Paul's Theology of the Body.

At present, we have the very serious situation of adults in positions of authority feeding children misleading information, knowing that that information will be used as a basis for their actions. And it will guide their actions not just while they're at school, but afterwards when they are let loose on college campuses and beyond. And I should say here that we're not just talking about giving them e.g. effectiveness rates for contraception which apply to mature adults in committed relationships rather than to young people in passing association, or even to the likelihood of side-effects and future disease – the few studies there are indicate that early pill use multiplies the likelihood of later breast cancer. There are also bigger questions. Does the Pill truly, as was promised, lead to greater happiness and marital fulfilment? Is it really fully reversible, without impacting upon future fertility? What are the connections between the availability of contraception, promiscuity, sexual diseases, family breakdown, and later adult loneliness? Have the colossal sums invested in sex education and free contraception really been for the public good?

Sex educationalists have a problem and you can understand why they filter what is taught. It's not only that they've failed to get children to use contraception consistently: it's the contraception itself. Strip the adjective 'modern' away and you realise that our methods are becoming rather old – over 50 years in the case of the Pill, "Sixties technology". And in those intervening years, despite the millions, perhaps billions, of dollars spent on research, there have been no substantial new methods. I was amused to read in the paper the other day that third and fourth generation Pills are now giving way to first and second generation ones. The same recipes come round, and are abandoned again, because they fail, because they are not liked, because of their side-effects. These are many, as anyone can read by glancing down the index of a practitioner's manual. The situation is further complicated by the surge in sexual diseases. The latest advice is that children should use both Pill and condom. But you can hardly say to them, "Be responsible: use a condom" if in the same breath you are also saying that for many STDs, such as chlamydia, there is no scientific evidence that even condoms help.

There is another way in which the sex educationalists are vulnerable, and that is that while they are struggling to sell methods which evidently don't work, the scientific community has moved on. We now know how easy it is to avoid pregnancy simply by respecting the signs of fertility, without recourse to drugs or devices. We also know,

from modern brainscan technology, that sexual activity has a powerful impact upon the chemistry and even the formation of the brain, especially in the young. Its careless use can be shown statistically to damage a young person's chances of a happy future. It's just not true that early sexual activity of any kind, with or without contraception, is responsible behaviour.

The whole idea of using drugs to suppress the functioning of a healthy body is also out of kilter with modern attitudes. I used my submission to the Government's PSHE consultation to point out that sex education is undermining much of the rest of the social education of our children. It is also only a matter of time before the green lobby catches up and points out that the gender-bending chemicals found in credit cards and plastic toys are not the main cause of a worrying increase in childhood illnesses: the artificial hormones imbibed by their mothers are being passed on not only to their children but, through the sewerage system, to the drinking water of us all.

Why is it that parents allow, and even want, their children to be subjected to school sex education? You may have your own answers. I have two. The first is that sex is a modest subject, and it is natural to be shy of broaching it. This is particularly true of single parents and others who are not completely at ease with their own sexual history. The second is that many people received very poor sex education themselves. They genuinely believe that what their children receive at school will at least be scientific and factually accurate, and they also think that any sex education must be better than what they received and what they think they could give.

We now have upon us the threat of gay marriage, and the pressure there will be for schools to teach it. This will only make what is already a very bad situation worse – and make no mistake: current sex education is already laced through with the homosexual agenda. What gay marriage may do is to wake people up, and give them the impetus to fight back. It could be that there will be no solution for Catholic schools other than to return to the wisdom of what the Church has always taught and bring sex education back into the home.

This leads me back to my original question: how is it that we can encourage parents, who would rather not, teach a subject they hardly know?

My answer has been to write a book. My Guide, of which you should each have a copy, is written in stories, which are not at all daunting but which I hope will intrigue adults as much as children. Fr Jay spoke to us, as it were, from God down, but I begin with the body, and work up to the truths which it reveals to us about our sexual nature and what it is designed for. Religion is nowhere mentioned. What I found in writing the Guide was that the various chapters fitted together like a jigsaw, the whole being much greater than any individual part. It is my hope that when parents read the book, their eyes will be opened to truths that have never been presented to them cogently before and that these truths will be sufficiently powerful for them to want to share them with their children, regardless of whether they have lived by them themselves.

How parents share the book with their children is up to them. They can read the chapters as they are, which makes life easy for them, or they can design their own lessons. The Introduction explains all this, and also why it is that parents are the best educators of their children. I hope you will read it.

It is not enough for individual parents to buy a book. What we need is for whole school communities to reject current invasive sex education programmes and instead take this kind of approach, so that the ambience is changed for all our children and their friends. Teachers and parish catechists will be vital. It is up to them to interest parents, and perhaps hold parent workshops to explain the Church's guidance and why it is so practical, and to enable parents to exchange views and encourage each other. In my experience, parents actually find that the job is not so hard, and is amply rewarded by new levels of friendship with their growing children. By taking the time and trouble to come alongside them, parents are in effect recognising the growing adults they are becoming. It can be seen as an important rite of passage.

As children become older, my later chapters could well become the blueprints for school workshops. They could also serve as the raw material for lessons for those children who, for whatever reason, come from homes where sex education will never be discussed.

As you will have gathered, I do not consider the work ahead of us is just for Catholics. Everything that I have said, and that Fr Jay has said, applies to the inner yearnings of the human heart. It is for the sake of every child, and most especially for the vulnerable, who risk most from present sex education policies, that Catholic parents and Catholic schools need to take a lead. It will not be easy. Nor will it be possible unless children are also well formed with the strengths of character to stand up to the world, and to stand up to themselves. I am delighted now to hand over to Robert O'Brien, who will be speaking more generally on the cultivation of virtue among the young.