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Parents are the primary sex educators

The Ontario government needs to do more than rethink the sex education curriculum; they need to reconsider the role of parents

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On April 22, 2010 the Ontario government declared its proposed sexual education curriculum needed a “rethink.” Parents objected to the content that would introduce oral and anal sex to seventh graders, who would also be encouraged to visit sexual health clinics. Among other controversial issues was the introduction of sexual orientation and gender issues to third graders. A rethink is absolutely welcome, but not merely of the curriculum content. The Ontario government needs to consider more broadly the role of parents in sexuality education. What is the state’s—or public schools’—interest in teaching sexuality to children and youth?

The province’s decision to pause the implementation of the new curriculum has created a flurry of opinion pieces and articles. Some give the impression that all sex education has been withdrawn. It hasn’t. Other articles warn that kids are in grave danger as they navigate their sexuality alone in the internet age. Parents are assumed to be absent, out of touch, or fearfully preferring ignorance. This obscures the real issues.

Parents are the primary sex educators

The proposed content undermines the Ontario curriculum document’s own statement that “parents are the primary educators of their children with respect to learning about values, appropriate behaviour, and ethnocultural, spiritual and personal beliefs and traditions...” [1] It is nearly impossible to present sex education as ethically sterile or value-less because it deals with how people relate to one another at the most intimate levels. Presenting sexuality in Ontario’s diverse classrooms will always invite passionate debate and disagreement.

Parents are the primary sex educators and a number of studies demonstrate that parents are the most influential people when it comes to teen sexual choices. [2] This influence begins long before “the talk.” An IMFC study found that parental behaviours modeled to kids during childhood correlate with later sexual choices. [3]

Parent-child closeness has been associated with reduced teen pregnancy, sexual abstinence, delaying sexual activity, fewer sexual partners or increased contraceptive use. [4] Studies show that preadolescent monitoring of girls “is an important basic function for young people who later on must make behaviour choices outside of parental view.” [5]

Several studies show moms are influential in helping young women delay sexual involvement and avoid pregnancy. A parenting style that is warm, supportive, and communicative, and involves

setting limits and high levels of supervision has been shown to reduce sexual risk behaviours. [6]

Some critics have argued that sexuality education is necessary for very young children because of the sheer volume of sexual content available through various forms of media. This amounts to a misguided attempt to beat the internet to the punch. Parents are best positioned to mediate these influences. Family physician and psychologist Leonard Sax reminds us that children, and in particular girls, are losing "middle childhood," or ages 8 to 12. [7] Adult driven media and consumerism are sexualizing children. Dr. Sax argues that this leads to anxiety and results in self-objectification and destructive behaviour. [8] Strong relationships with parents best combat this trend.

Sexuality education in school

Sex education is firmly rooted in public education, but remains a dull arrow in the quiver compared to support from strong familial relations. The provincial curriculum rethink should include greater parental input and should emphasize current medically accurate information, not old sexual ideologies. As author and psychiatrist Miriam Grossman has stated, "Where sexual freedom is the priority, sexual health suffers." [9] It seems that even the safer sex mantra is being displaced in favour of sexual choice and freedom. [10]

Parents are best positioned to know when their child is ready to learn about various aspects of sexuality. Parents are sensitive to how that should take place. Parents need to be actively discerning the cultural environment and engaging their children appropriately. Schools should make parents aware of their approach to sex education, and allow for alternative learning opportunities when sensitive topics are addressed. In the end, the province needs to do more than ponder curriculum content: Let's hope the provincial rethink on sexuality education actually engages and respects parents.

Endnotes

1. Ontario Ministry of Education (2010). The Ontario curriculum grades 1-8; health and physical education. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, p.10.
2. Albert, D. (2009, Spring). With one voice (lite). Washington: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved May 3, 2010 from http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV_Lite_2009.pdf and Teens talk about sex, regret, and the influence of their parents (2000, June 30). Washington: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Retrieved May 3, 2010 from http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/NotJust_FINAL.pdf
3. Mitchell, P.J. (2009). Rated PG: How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Available at http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC%20OCTOBER_Final.pdf
4. Miller, B.C., Benson, B. and Galbraith, K.A. (2001). Family relationships and adolescent pregnancy risk: a research synthesis. *Developmental Review*, vol. 21.
5. Longmore, M.A., Manning, W.D. and Giordano, P.C. (2000). Preadolescent parenting strategies and teens' dating and sexual initiation: a longitudinal analysis. Bowling Green: Center for Family and Demographic research.
6. DeVore, E.R., Ginsburg, K.R. (2005, August). The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 17(4). Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.percdublin.org/Files/Protective_effects_good_parenting.pdf
7. Fillion, K. (2010, May 10). Gender expert Leonard Sax on the empty world of girls. *Maclean's*, pp.19-21.
8. *Ibid.*
9. For the complete interview with Dr. Grossman see, "You're teaching my child what?" An interview with Miriam Grossman, MD (2009, September 9). eReview no. 77. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Available at https://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/eReview_Sept_9_2009.pdf
10. Healthy, Happy and Hot, produced by International Planned Parenthood Federation in January 2010 is described as "a guide for young people living with HIV." It advises, "Sometimes people choose not to have safer sex. If this is something you and your partner agree to, then it is your choice." (p.12) The guide provides alternative risk reduction strategies such as generous lubrication. This amounts to little more than advising young people to cross their fingers or hope for the best. Available at <http://www.ippf.org/NR/rdonlyres/B4462DDE-487D-4194-B0E0-193A04095819/0/HappyHealthyHot.pdf>