

The naming of parts - for five-year-olds

Published December 4, 2013
By Carolyn Moynihan

New Zealand parents with children starting school may have to decide whether they want their five- and six-year-olds to learn, in class, not only the proper names of sexual organs but how they function. Kathryn Heape, who launched the [Every Body Education](#) programme this year, said in a [television interview](#):

"We talk about how the baby grows in the uterus, [and] we talk about how the penis's job is to deliver the sperm to the egg through the vagina. It's all very matter of fact."

Other information covered in [the programme](#) aimed at year 1 and 2 primary school students includes how a baby is born, that sex is an adult activity and what condoms look like.

What they look like when? Surely this is too much information, irrelevant information, for little children.

Auckland mum Carla Smith thought so when she attended a parents' evening at the school her three young children go to, and wrote a [note on Facebook](#) to alert other parents. She told [told TV3](#):

"I just think you're placing seeds in their head which they may not know what to do with. Who knows where those seeds are going to go in the future, and in what directions they're going to turn."

There is plenty of evidence already, in the world of online social networking, that such untimely sowing yields a harvest of precocious sexual talk and display -- with the risk of being seduced by predators.

Ms Heape, a health education specialist who has taught in primary and secondary schools, set up Every Body Education after spending a year in Vancouver with Canadian sexual health educator, [Saleema Noon](#). She says that sex education in primary schools has been hugely successful in Canada.

Well, it depends on what you mean by success. *Family Edge* asked Peter Jon Mitchell, senior researcher with the [Institute of Marriage and Family Canada](#) (IMFC), what he thought.

"Does she mean successful implementation or outcomes or something else altogether?" he wondered. In any case, he points out, the Canadian picture is a little less romantic than Heape paints it.

Peter Jon Mitchell takes up the story:

School based sexuality education is under provincial jurisdiction so there is no uniformity across Canada's ten provinces. The federal government has general sexual health guidelines that extend beyond the school years, but it is up to the provinces to develop and implement curriculum.

Heape's [website](#) indicates she spent time with a sexual health education group in the province of British Columbia. It appears the group makes itself available to schools, probably much like the Everybody Program.

I did a brief check of the BC curriculum for ages 5 and 6. The curriculum addresses proper names of body parts with a concern to protecting children from abuse. The other elements raised in the video do not appear to be part of the provincial curriculum for 5 and 6 year olds such as the mechanics of intercourse and what a condom looks like. The BC curriculum documents are [here](#).

Canada has not been immune to debates over sexuality education. The province of Ontario attempted to implement a revised primary sexuality curriculum in 2010 but pulled the program for 'a rethink' after some vocal parents and groups complained. Sex ed advocates have been campaigning for its return. I doubt Heape would count Ontario as a success.

The province of New Brunswick implemented a progressive sexuality education curriculum in the mid-2000s – the kind of program advocates cheer for. Unfortunately between 2006 and 2010, the teen pregnancy rate in New Brunswick [increased by almost 40 percent](#). (See also "[Trends in Canadian National and Provincial/Territorial Teen Pregnancy Rates: 2001-2010](#)") Is this success?

I've often referred to this advice from the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#); "Parents should respond to the needs and curiosity level of their individual child, offering no more or less information than their child is asking for and is able to understand."

Take-home lesson? When it comes to sex-ed for little children at school, less is more – and nothing at all is probably best.