

The Common Sense of Sex Education

WILLARD BEECHER, *New York*

In the past, sex education for children has been concerned mainly with imparting biological facts to physically immature individuals. There have been controversies over whether this is helpful or harmful to children. Some have said that if children are taught sex at an early age the sexual difficulties of mature life would be avoided. Others have felt that such teaching would create a morbid interest in sexuality. This biological approach seems to reflect some of the broader implications of the problem.

Adler pointed out that sex is as much a social matter as a private occupation. Being a male or being a female means vastly more in terms of our culture than our past emphasis upon biological facts would indicate. The individual lives in a social context and the biological function of sex is but a part of his total life. But social living is strongly influenced by the sexuality of human beings. The two sexes exaggerate their biologic differences with differences in attitudes and customs. Most of the sexual difficulties we wish to avoid arise more from the attitudes and customs surrounding sexuality and sex-differences than from the sex differences themselves. In short, sex education for the child ought to be directed more toward the understanding of our cultural conditioning than it is at present, so that we may see the facts in their social connectedness.

According to some, female envy of the male penis leads to many psychic difficulties experienced by women and girls. This concept, with which we do not agree, was the result of an effort to understand sex apart from social customs elaborated for its functioning. Our social life and folkways are transmitted from a patriarchal past when the male was given the dominant role and owned the females. All prestige and worldly advantages were given to the male, the female retaining as her right those nonpredatory characteristics unacceptable or useless to the predatory male. Even today the word "masculine" symbolizes all that is dominant, and "feminine" signifies the passive and submissive human characteristics.

In such a world, who would not rather be a male than a female? The female role in modern culture is still undervalued and looked down on because it offers fewer material advantages. And as long as greater privileges are given the male because of biologically accidental maleness, females will be envious. No one cares to accept a position of permanent inferiority throughout life,—one that can never be fully compensated while the condition of being female is considered less valuable than that of being male.

The first sex education any girl or boy gets is the understanding that there are differences of privilege in favor of the male. Children discover this long before they are aware of the biological differences. We do not

tell them but they see that the father has greater freedom and more self-determination than the mother. Social pressure is applied early to persuade girls to be passive and even greater pressure is put on boys to be aggressive. A boy with a dirty face is taken for granted but a girl who is dirty is shamed into overvaluing cleanliness. By such devices, we subdue in girls the activity which is natural to both girls and boys. A girl who has to remain clean at all times must avoid activities reserved for boys and cultivate only the passive, emasculated traits which are considered unworthy of men. These not too subtle pressures exerted on children from the first days of life soon result in what is called "masculine" and "feminine" behavior. The female is actively restrained by the customs of our patriarchal civilization and discouraged from participating, as an equal, with the male. While this custom remains unchanged, there will be competition and enmity between the sexes.

Social customs rather than biological sex function determine the manner and time in which sex will be experienced and expressed by the individual. Parents and teachers must decide whether they want to continue this customary inequality between the sexes. If they believe that the future of the race is best served by artificially limiting the powers of each female, then we shall probably continue trying to make boys more manly (masculine) and girls less manly (feminine). "Masculine" and "feminine" are artifacts of our culture and must no longer be confused with male and female. On the other hand, if we believe that the future of mankind is better served by a greater equality and identity of interest between the sexes, we must discard the fictions of masculinity and femininity and the bitter competitions they engender.

Sex education, for the young, ought to be a conscious evaluation of these factors as they apply to the daily lives of our children. The life-attitudes are being solidified during childhood and it is for us to determine the direction of the trends to be expressed in later life. When we call a boy a sissy we do more than shame him, we defame and dishonor all human females in the same breath! The damage done the boy is small in comparison to the harm inflicted on females by using their sex as a standard of worthlessness for evaluating the boy. The whole pessimism with which our culture still regards women and girls is expressed in the word "sissy."

The little business of imparting biological facts of sex is inconsiderable in its effect on individual children in comparison to the dynamic effect of what it means in terms of personal advantage to be a boy or girl in our culture. It might be far more useful for us to teach boys and girls that they ought to regard each other with some degree of equality. We should worry less about what is commonly called sex instruction. An arrogant male child who is trained to conquer others in his environment will—as a man—probably try to conquer women sexually. And the woman who is

envious of the arrogant male will try to make him "fall" for her in an effort to dominate him. In both cases, sex is used as a weapon instead of a common bond. Sex difficulties do not arise from ignorance of biology nearly so often as they stem from the mutual antagonism and fear engendered by overvaluing the male role and undervaluing the female role in our culture. No real fellowship is possible between males and females in our civilization because of this mistake.

Women themselves contribute much toward keeping up this mistaken traditional attitude. Their resentment against being undervalued females is so strong that they do not enjoy the society of each other. Witness the term "hen party" and the scornful tone of the average woman toward such gatherings. This attitude only contributes to the general scorn heaped upon the female. It is unfortunate that women too often assist in their own degradation by failing to understand the implications of such thinking.

Men and women marry in spite of the cultural antagonism which exists between them. But marriage brings less happiness than it might to most people. The responsibility for this is frequently ascribed to sexual incompatibility and female frigidity or masculine impotence but such words explain nothing. Marriage is a job for two equal partners and cannot succeed when rivalry exists. And in spite of this, we continue to train our children so that the rivalry will be present! The fear of being conquered and continually depreciated keeps many men and women from marriage. Or if they marry it induces fighting, nagging, whining, frigidity, and all the ills too common to the married state. Training for fellowship and a feeling of equality between the sexes is the only kind of sex education which will not fail its mark. We must remove or minimize the effect of our inherited patriarchal custom on our children. The boy who looks down on girls or the girl who envies boys will grow up to be a dissatisfied marriage partner. Our program of sex education ought to be the correction of such mistaken attitudes before puberty. We must change our cultural views!

The sex function will be used in human relationships exactly as the attitude toward the opposite sex determines; it has no autonomous life of its own. Imparting the biological facts will neither help nor harm, for the knowledge will be used according to the character of the individual who receives the instruction. Adequate functioning demands cooperation and cooperation can exist only when there is a feeling of equality present. Our sex education then is more rightly accomplished when we remove those attitudes of superiority and inferiority which are obstacles to cooperation among children. To the degree we can remove the injurious fictions of the so-called masculine and feminine character difference, we promote a feeling of mutual regard between males and females. An identity of interest will guarantee proper use of the sexual function, and the biology of sex can be superimposed without fear of damage to anyone.