

Helping children learn about sex and relationships

Openness in discussion about sex and relationships is one of the ways in which society has changed dramatically in recent years, and it is vital that we present a positive message which can combat the wrong teaching of the world. Alan Proctor (Macclesfield, UK), a brother with expertise in aspects of counselling, offers advice about how to navigate this potentially tricky yet tremendously important area.

THERE IS an assumption which forms the basis of this article. The assumption is that the biological teaching about sex has already been done by parents and by school. Teaching about sex, one again assumes, would include such topics as contraception, safe sex, and sexually transmitted diseases. But there are two main problems with this basic assumption. First, with regard to school, we would need to question, not the accuracy of the information, but the setting in which that information was given. Second, we would need to question the assumption about parents, because some parents find it difficult to talk to their children about sex, and may neglect to cover the subject properly for that reason.

One may wonder why some parents find discussing sex embarrassing and difficult. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that often we consider sex as being apart or separate from our religious life, not an integral part of what we term 'the Truth'. The attitude we had for many years towards the Song of Songs would indicate our difficulty with sex in a religious setting. In the book *Sex and the Bible Believer*¹ it is pointed out that Hebrew scholars knew that the Song of Songs was about sex and marriage, but for various reasons we tended to think of it as only a spiritual analogy.

In his book *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, Eugene Peterson points out not only that the Song of Songs is *at the same time* about sex and also our relationship with God, but also that the Jews read the Song of Songs at the time of Passover. This would indicate that our covenant relationship with God is an intimate one that we reflect in our own intimate sexual relationships. This should

be no surprise, as it was God Who created sex in the first place.

The Apostle Paul in Ephesians is following the same theme when he talks about husbands and wives. The importance in relation to teaching children about sex is that, in an environment in which fellowship with God and Jesus is reflected in the intimate relationship of husband and wife, talking and learning about sex is

done in a proper setting. In this family setting, the children learn about trust, and about a love which loves even when behaviour is not approved. These attributes of family life will prove invaluable in the teenage years, and cannot be suddenly evoked when urgently needed.

Parents talking to children about sex

When a child sees trust and love daily in its parents, then the child is enabled to trust and love the parents and feels safe to ask the question, "Where do babies come from?". The young child should be told the truth at a level which they can understand, but clearly indicating that love, trust and mutual respect are involved. To concoct a story about storks, etc., is to undermine the trust of the child at some future stage.

This relaxed way of talking about sex sets the scene for future years, as it should be done as occasion arises, in small doses and not saved up for some big event lecture. Should parents be tempted to save the sex talk for the one event they will probably find they are too late. Others will have talked about it to their child. You want your child to learn about sex in your context of God and Jesus. The other reason for keeping the teaching ongoing is that the world around your children is constantly overloading them with false information. The knowledge you have given your child will help them counteract this.

The teenage years come all too quickly, and with them some difficult times for your chil-

1. *Sex and the Bible Believer*. Compiled and published by the Christadelphians, 16 St. David's Drive, Quinton, Birmingham, B32 1QS.

dren. Looks become all-important, and the rate at which they physically develop becomes for them a cause of concern. For girls there will be concern about the size of breasts, while the boys will be anxious about the need to shave. At this stage your children need to know that you love and value them, and that they can still talk to you. Besides physical bodily development, there will be much talk among their peers about sex. Such conversations may well promote the idea that having sex is a way to establish that you are alright, that you have value and look fine, if not beautiful or handsome. The years of daily providing an example that sex takes place within a trusting and loving relationship will, at this stage, form the basis of indicating the dangers of premarital sex, and also why it is important that the only place where sexual intercourse takes place is in marriage.

The first experience of sexual intercourse colours our future pleasure or otherwise of sex. The act of sex is about two people becoming, as the Bible says, "one flesh". A close relationship like this needs trust and love because, regardless of what films may portray, sexual intercourse needs time to come to full beauty. Sex is about meeting the needs of another, not just responding to one's own urges or desires. Teenagers need to be made aware that such mutual learning takes time.

The issues of premarital sex, courtship and masturbation

The argument that there is a need to explore sex before marriage in order to understand the sexual relationship may sound reasonable, but it is false. Sex before marriage often leads to feelings of being abandoned and discarded. There is also the danger faced by many young girls of an unwanted pregnancy; sex is never absolutely 'safe'. For the exploration of the sexual relationship to be beautiful and meaningful it needs to take place within a relationship of commitment and mutual love and trust. Our intimate and sexual relationship is, after all, reflecting our intimate covenant relationship with God.

The next question to arise is that, if sex is to be kept for marriage, then how far can one go in courtship? One would hope that, with the past years of growing up in a family where such relationships have been freely talked about, the teenagers will be able to decide the bounds for themselves. The whole issue about sex is not about rules but about understanding relationships in the context of the fellowship we enjoy with God and

Jesus. There will, however, perhaps be a need to highlight the power of emotions and how easy it is to go beyond the bounds we set ourselves. The bounds need to be set within very safe limits, and not, as it were, near the edge.

The question of masturbation may also arise at this point, or perhaps you as the parent will need to introduce it. Many myths surround masturbation, and these need to be dispelled. Statistics indicate that masturbation is very common, and it comes at a time when urges need some release. Masturbation should not be confused with 'wet dreams', over which we have no control. Masturbation is within our control, and should be seen as an act which satisfies only our needs, being therefore far removed from real sex, which is about the needs of another person we love. Masturbation is also often aroused by pictures, and this is particularly so for boys and men. Avoidance of such material can be talked about. Pornography sees sex only as an act of self-satisfaction. We want our sexual relationships to be an integral part of our salvation through God's grace, a reflection of His love for us.

Homosexuality and sexual abuse of children

What if, at this stage, your child, now of course an adult, tells you that he or she is gay? Dealing with the fact that your child is homosexual is very difficult. Your hopes and dreams for their future are shattered. The hopes of your child have also been shattered, and it has taken them a lot of heart-searching to tell you. Their feelings of self-worth may be very low, and at this point they need your love and value of them more than anything. They will know, without you telling them, God's view of homosexuality, provided you have shared all through their lives the relationship between sex and our fellowship with God. Your child needs your support and prayers to deal with this situation. This is not the time to walk away from them. Left to themselves the only solution for some young people is suicide.

While God created sex to reflect our intimate relationship to Him, and for pleasure, man has managed to destroy the beauty of sex. Your child needs to know at a level appropriate to them about the possibility of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse (and indeed any abuse) is about a misuse of power, usually by an adult with a child. To protect your child you need to find a way of telling them that the touching by an adult of parts of their body that does not feel right, even an adult

known within the family, is wrong. Your child needs to know that they can tell you about this. As the abuser will often tell the child that the abuse is a secret, it is important for the child to talk to the parents. Children will usually feel that the abuse is their fault. Your child needs your protection and needs you to believe what they are telling you, so do not push aside what you are told as of little importance. Believe your child and act. Social Services will help you in sorting

the matter out, because it is too big an issue to deal with on your own.

This article has just touched on many of the issues involved in teaching your child about sex, and it has not been possible to deal with those issues in depth. You may find two books of help: *Sex and the Bible Believer*, which is compiled and published by Christadelphians,¹ and the *Parent Talk Guide to Your Child and Sex*, published by Hodder and Stoughton.

The changing scenes of life

Preparing our children to leave home

Having passed through the turbulent times of adolescence, it is not long before our children are ready for their next adventure. Simon and Helen Collard (Cambridge, UK) guide us through the basics of getting our children ready to leave home. It's a process that begins, not when they are approaching 18, but as soon as they are born.

"For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Lk. 16:8).

PEOPLE IN THE WORLD are often better at preparing for the inevitable than we are. This is typified in the way that provision is made for a child's future financial needs. With the cost of university education and property rising quickly in most countries, tax-free savings accounts are started in the child's name at the earliest possible moment. There is nothing particularly wrong with this practice, of course, but we, as "children of light", should be equally diligent and timely in our spiritual investment for our children, so that they are prepared for the day when it will be needed.

Taking the financial analogy a little further, few people have the resources to make a single down-payment for their child's future welfare. Most have to put a little sum away into a 'safe' place each month or week so that the value can accumulate and appreciate. A spiritual investment cannot be made in a single day; a little has to be prepared

each day of the child's life, "precept . . . upon precept; line upon line" (Isa. 28:9-11). This daily building up of a child's knowledge will certainly accumulate, and will prove to be of inestimable value in later life.

Spiritual preparation should begin at the earliest opportunity. As soon as the midwife departs to allow the parents time on their own with their newborn baby, a start should be made. Make sure one of you has a pocket Bible ready (preferably the father, because it is his responsibility). Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the safe arrival of His gift (Ps. 127:3) and do a short reading. (One of our children was born on 11 January, and Psalm 23, the middle reading for the day, was just perfect for the occasion.) At this point the words of Peter become exquisitely appropriate: "as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). We should start as we mean to go on. That child should never know a time when the Word of God and voice of prayer is not heard in the household.

Training a child

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6).

At what age would you be prepared to let your child leave your home and live away? Parents who want the best for their children would say as late as possible, in order to make the best use