

Is Ignorance Painful?

Sex Education for Elementary Students

Can we discuss these in class?" asked Marty, an eighth grader, as he plopped the birth control pamphlets on my desk. "My dad got 'em for me at Planned Parenthood." He studied my reaction.

"Let me think about it," I hedged, shuffling through the materials. "There are some things to consider."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Well, some parents want to be in charge of that part of their child's education," I said.

I pondered my dilemma the rest of the day. As a junior-high church school teacher, just what responsibility did I have to these young people in the area of sex education?

Earlier in the school year Mark had asked in class, "Why don't they have sex education in Adventist schools?"

"We do have some," I replied. "But it's often disguised as part of the science curriculum."

"Oh, I remember now," he said. "In fifth grade all the kids laughed when Travis asked, 'What's a vagina?' He was pretty embarrassed, wasn't he?"

"And, Mark, I remember when you asked in Bible class, 'What's a circumcision?'"

"But I knew what it meant," he countered. "I was just wondering what you'd say."

"If you remember, I explained it. It was a reasonable question, if you didn't know the meaning."

"How come my mom doesn't answer like you? She gets all flustered when I ask her questions like those," he said.

It's true, I thought. A lot of parents are uncomfortable with the subject. I can't say that as a parent or teacher I've always felt at ease about it either.

Bible class seems to be the place these discussions most often take place. There

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had been little doubt that the students knew what Potiphar's wife had in mind with Joseph, and no one questioned why David called for Bathsheba, but I winced when they asked what the men of Sodom wanted. There is simply no way to escape sex education in Bible class!

Recently U.S. church school teachers have learned that state and national law and the General Conference Education Department requires them to teach an AIDS unit, starting in fifth grade and continuing through the senior year of academy.

"Just what do Adventist eighth-graders know about sex?" I found myself wondering recently. Based on the science curriculum we assume they know some basic facts about anatomy, but what have they learned from parents, peers, and the media?

Stories about homosexuality, abortion, AIDS, prostitution, rape, molestation, and a variety of other sexually related subjects have been hurled at young people at an alarming rate recently. This needs to be counterbalanced by some positive—and accurate—information.

Studies show that 60 to 80 percent of

young people have had sexual intercourse prior to marriage.¹ Some experts say it's as high as nine out of ten.² Surprisingly, young people from Christian homes seem to show nearly the same percentages.³

We have a problem. Our young people are involved—whether we like it or not. So should we offer sex education classes in our schools?

Sex education inevitably occurs from peers, the media, and other sources. Indeed, neglect is a form of education. So the question is, Who should teach our youth about sexuality?

If we fail to deal with the subject adequately, our young people will conclude that it's not important, or they may decide it isn't a proper topic for discussion and has no place in Christian teachings.

Though many parents say they want to be in charge of that part of their child's education, most parents shirk their duty in this area. Only 20 to 25 percent of parents ever talk to their children about sexuality, and even fewer talk with them about the biblical principles involved.

Since parents often don't discuss the subject, and most adolescents don't feel comfortable talking about it with their parents, how will young people learn the truth about Christian sexuality?

The answer is *schools*. I've compiled a number of reasons why I think the Adventist Church needs to set up a K-12 sex education program that deals sensitively with the biological, emotional, and biblical aspects of sexuality.

- Children need to learn that every organ of the body, including the sex organs, is a gift of God and is to be used to His glory. This concept is an important part of their Christian character development and our church's theology.

- Improper sex education can cast a shadow over a person's entire life. Peo-

ple often reap devastating, lifetime consequences because they made poor decisions due to ignorance or misinformation. Young people need to know that strong, emotional feelings are involved in sex, but that those desires can be controlled. They need to know where to draw the line so they don't get into dangerous situations. They need positive reasons to refrain—gathered from correct knowledge and an informed conscience.

● Someone must instruct our young people in Bible values before their peers give them a sordid, warped view of sexuality. Knowledge about these topics ensures them an equality with their peers. It contributes to their self-respect, and removes the need for them to obtain information from friends.

Research indicates that proper sex education reduces the desire to experiment.⁴ If a child has to get his knowledge about sex from peers experimentation usually increases.

Young people need to know about male and female responses so they don't behave provocatively or become involved in embarrassing or potentially dangerous situations. I've had teenage boys ask me to talk to girls who were innocently giving "come on" messages.

● Positive information about sexual topics protects young people against exploitation. Many church school teachers have had to deal with the results of sexual abuse. Positive, accurate information helps the child deal with a number of issues related to sexuality, such as homosexuality, prostitution, and molestation.

Even young children need to understand the difference between good and bad touching. They need to learn that they have a right to say No. Skillfully handled sex education classes can help

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children gain the courage to report abuse.

● A well-designed sex-education curriculum can also help young people learn about male and female roles, and set the stage for successful Christian marriages. Young people need information about the function of their sex organs, the emotions related to sexuality, and the various methods of contraception so they can regulate family size.

With the media blasting our young people with immoral images from every side, we can help them by giving a positive foundation about the blessing God intended sex to be.

● If some of our young people choose to live by the loose standards of modern society, they need all the information they can get to prevent unplanned pregnancies, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

One day a mother of one of my students voiced dismay because her non-SDA husband wanted to buy condoms for their 14-year-old son. She felt this would give him the message that sex outside of marriage was OK if you took precautions.

I can understand her concern, and yet if he's going to engage in sex, don't we want him to be as safe as possible?

Issues like this one, and others relating to sexuality have been hotly discussed in both the public arena and the church. What is the best way to teach abstinence? Under what circumstances is abortion justified? What do you tell young people (and at what age?) about homosexuality and incest? These are difficult questions on which thoughtful people do not always agree. However, the answer is not to avoid discussing these topics. Adventist parents and teachers have a solemn responsibility to teach our young people Christian principles relating to sexuality.

● We need to help young people understand that if they have been involved in illicit sexual behavior they can gain forgiveness and power to overcome temptation through Christ. They don't have to perpetually live with guilt that keeps them from being at peace with God.

Some parents might contend that a K-12 sex education program would mean too much discussion of the subject and would encourage young people to go out and try it. This should not happen if the class utilizes a strong "values" approach.

Sex education needs to be taught in a school setting because the world is moving at breakneck speed in the misuse of human sexuality. It will be hard enough in the coming years for teachers, with the aid of workshops and seminars, to keep up with current information and research. Individual parents will have an even more difficult time keeping up to date.

Ideally, sex education in our schools should involve both parents and teachers. Lines of communication need to be kept open between home and school. Teachers can help the parents learn about the biblical basis of sexuality, methods of instruction in the home, age-appropriate concepts, role-modeling, and ways to answer difficult questions.

I laughed when I saw a poster recently on a fellow teacher's classroom door. It read, "It's too bad ignorance isn't painful." I told a student about it later.

He looked at me soberly and said, "Sometimes it is."

He's right. Ignorance in sexual matters may not only be painful, but catastrophic—and potentially deadly. □

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REFERENCES

¹ Gregg Albers, *Plague in Our Midst* (Lafayette, Louisiana, Huntington House, Inc., 1988), pp. 13, 114.

² Charles E. Wittschiede, *Your Teens and Sex* (Washington, D.C.) Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1983), p. 16.

³ Albers, p. 13.

⁴ Wittschiede, pp. 90-92.