

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CLINICAL SEXOLOGISTS

AT MAIMONIDES UNIVERSITY

A STUDY OF WHAT ARE PARENTS TEACHING THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT  
WHERE BABIES COME FROM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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BY

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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**To our loving husbands: Chuck and Bogdan**

**Next to the love of life, (sex) shows itself...  
as the strongest and most active of all motives,  
and incessantly lays claim to half the powers and  
thoughts of mankind.**

**- Schopenhauer**

*The World as Will and Representation*

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## DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This dissertation submitted by Jo-Ann H. Bird and Krystyna Piorkowski has been read and approved by three faculty members of the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists at Maimonides University.

The final copies have been examined by the Dissertation Committee and the signatures which appear here verify the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given the final approval with reference to content, form and mechanical accuracy.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## VITAS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Children learn about sexuality directly and indirectly from a variety of sources. Some of this information may be unrealistic, misleading or limited. There is evidence that shows that communication between parents and their children about sexuality is important. Thus, this research looks at what parents are teaching their children about coitus or where babies come from. Our hypothesis is that parents are not teaching factual information about coitus to their children and if they are teaching their children, the information is often vague, abstract, and very limited. Seventy parents, ages twenty-five to seventy-five, from Venice, Florida were interviewed. Despite the vast array of available resources that help parents talk to their children about coitus and sexuality, the results seem to support the hypothesis. These researchers hope that this information is helpful in generating further studies surrounding what parents are specifically teaching their children about coitus and on the possible development of sex education programs for parents or other family members.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

Sexual values, attitudes, gender roles, and norms develop during childhood. From birth, infants start learning about sexuality and gender roles when their parents talk to them, hug them, dress them, show affection and interact with them (Haffner 2000, 21). In fact, according to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, we learn from observing and imitating the behavior of people around us (Bandura 1977 as cited in Craig 1989). As they grow older, children continue to learn about sexuality from their family, peers and their environment, either directly or indirectly. This is important to understand since children today are being flooded with sexual images and content from a variety of different media sources. Sexual images and themes can be seen in today's television commercials and shows, movies, computer games, billboards and other advertising, lyrics of music, magazines, and of course, the Internet. While some media sources incorporate positive messages about sexuality, most portray sexual messages that are unrealistic and misleading. In fact, some of these sources seem to just sensationalize sex and objectify women.

A report to the Kaiser Family Foundation showed the results of content analyses of different media sources that are available to children and adolescents. In prime time television, content analyses showed references to heterosexual intercourse and sexual behavior increased, messages pertaining to responsible sexual behaviors occurred in a joking manner (Lowry and Shidler 1993 as cited in Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein 1998), and sex was shown in a recreational manner (Ward 1995 as cited in Huston,

Wartella and Donnerstein 1998). During the family hour, a study showed that sexual content increased from 1976 to 1996 and sexual content was seen in three-fourths of programs (Kunkel, Cope and Colvin 1996 as cited in Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein 1998). In regards to movies, research showed they contain more explicit sexual behavior than television and that there is more unmarried sexual activity shown along with profanity and substance use (Greenberg, Siemicki, Dorfman, Heeter, Stanley, Soderman and Linsangan 1993 as cited in Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein 1998). In music videos that target young audiences, sexual content is often paired with aggression (Baxter et al. 1985; Sherman and Dominick 1986 as cited in Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein 1998) and “objectification and sex-role stereotyping” (Seidman 1992; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan and Davis 1993 as cited in Huston, Wartella and Donnerstein 1998). In magazines, articles are often devoted to sexual issues (Huston, Wartella, and Donnerstein 1998). In regards to advertising, sex is often used to sell a variety of products, yet society blames young people for responding to these cues and becoming sexually active instead of blaming the advertisers (Strasburger 1997, 403-414). Even though most media sources are not meant to educate us, children and adolescents often mistake the sexual images and information they receive from the media for reality.

These results are alarming since, on average, American children reportedly watch twenty-four hours of television a week (Haffner 2000, 112). More specifically, children between the ages of six and eight spend more time watching television than doing other activities such as eating, playing, doing sports, chores and going to church (Haffner 2000, 112). Regarding the influence of television on children, one study by Girls, Inc. showed that fifty-one percent of girls, in the study between the ages of three to six, said they talk

like a character on television, thirty-seven percent said they have acted like a character they have seen on television and one-quarter said they have dressed like or have worn their hair like a character on television (Haffner 2000, 113). One in six of the girls said they have exercised or dieted to look like a character on television (Haffner 2000, 113).

Children also learn about sexuality from the sex education programs being taught in some schools, yet the information being taught in some cases is limited, focusing mainly on reproductive anatomy, puberty and abstinence. Equally important, there are only twenty-three states plus the District of Columbia that require schools to provide sexuality education (The NARAL Foundation 1997 as cited in SEICUS 1998). Sex education programs that rely mainly on giving information about sex have reportedly failed (Ubell 1995, 18-20 as cited in the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California San Francisco 1996). Plus, abstinence-only programs have not been found to be effective (Kirby 1997 as cited in SEICUS 1998). Thus, if this information is limited and unsuccessful, then who is providing the rest of the sexual information to children? If this leaves the sole responsibility on parents and caregivers, then what exactly are they teaching?

Parents and caregivers do play an important role in teaching their children about sexuality. They have the opportunity to show and discuss their own sexual attitudes and values with their children. However, is this parental communication or influence important? The remainder of this chapter that follows reviews literature that shows evidence that parents do influence their children's sexuality. After this review, the chapter ends with our research question and hypothesis which we explore in this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Literature Review**

There have been many studies investigating the importance of parent communication or parents' influence on their children's sexuality. An article by Fox in 1979, revealed there was not a lot of communication about sex occurring in homes and in the studies reviewed, parents were never cited as the major source of sexual information. It was also reported that children that did receive sex education from their parents seemed to postpone their sexual activity and, if sexually active, appeared to relate to effective contraceptive use by the child.

Newcomer and Udry in 1985 showed that teenagers are often unaware of their parents' attitudes about sexual issues. The researchers reported that this may be due to parents not being very specific in what they teach young children about sex, but are more specific as the children mature. They also suggested that parents need to be aware that young adolescents often do not hear or retain information that parents believe they are communicating. Their data indicated that parent-child communication had little effect on the child's initiation of coitus or contraceptive behavior. The researcher suggested that this may be due to the communication about sex being "so vague or so limited as to have no impact".

In 1987, Thornton and Caniburn found that children have less restrictive attitudes about sex when their mother's have the same attitudes themselves. Further, it indicated that children who are sexually active seemed to have mothers with more permissive attitudes about sex. This study also showed that the behaviors and experiences of

mothers did influence their child's behavior and attitudes. For instance, children of mothers that remarry had more sexual experience than children of mothers that divorced but did not remarry. Also, the mother's religious involvement seemed to influence the sexual attitudes and behaviors of young adolescents.

Casper conducted a study in 1990 with results showing that family interaction can be influential at reducing adolescent pregnancy and is effective at encouraging girls who are sexually active to use contraceptives. The data reportedly failed to show that families are effective at stopping adolescent girls' initiation of sexual activity. They suggested that the results show that some families do not interact effectively or at all. Another study by Luster and Small in 1994 showed that low GPA, frequent alcohol consumption, low levels of parental monitoring, and lack of communication about birth control from mothers were factors associated with sexual risk-taking among girls.

The results of a study by Hutchinson and Cooney, 1998, showed that parents do not adequately discuss issues related to sexual-risk behavior. The results also indicated that the majority of young women wanted their mothers or fathers to discuss certain sexual topics with them but did not. In a review of the literature by Meschke, Bartholomae and Zentall in 2000, they reported that adolescent sexual behavior is related to parental factors such as communication, values, warmth and support, and monitoring and control. Also, they suggested that the parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior depends on the quality of the relationship.

Moore, Raymond, Mittelstaedt, and Tanner, 2002, concluded that parents are important socialization agents regarding adolescents' sexual behaviors and attitudes; and adolescents that have parental interventions seemed to have less problems with the onset

of sexual activity. Walker (2004) reported, “There is substantial evidence supporting the potential positive impact on children’s and young people’s health that derives from confident parents openly discussing sexual matters with them. This evidence suggests that when this is the case the following result: children are more confident in discussing sexual matters themselves; likely to delay their first sexual encounter; use effective contraceptives when they become sexually active; and have fewer sexual partners (Johnson et al., 1994, Ingham, 1997; Wellings et al., 2001).”

Based on the review of literature, it is evident that communication between parents and their children about sexuality is important. Thus, our research question is, “What are parents teaching their children about coitus or where babies come from?” Coitus is defined as sexual intercourse between two human beings (Morris 1973, 260). For this paper, coitus is defined more specifically as sexual intercourse involving the penis penetrating the vagina. These researchers know from our own experiences growing up twenty-five and forty years ago, that our parents either said babies come from the cabbage patch or never said anything at all. Despite the vast array of resources (books, videos, pamphlets, etc.) available for parents, our hypothesis is that parents are not teaching factual information about coitus to their children and if they are teaching their children, the information given is often vague, abstract, and very limited. If our hypothesis is correct, then this information may be valuable in developing a sex education program for parents (or other adult family members) that assists them with teaching their children about sex.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Subjects

The data came from a sample of convenience made up of seventy parents (subjects) from a mental health private practice and a parish church in Venice, Florida. The subjects' identities were kept anonymous; however the following demographic information was obtained (i.e. gender, age, spiritual/religious affiliation, education, race, and marital status). Of the seventy subjects, fifty-five were females and fifteen were males. It is important to note that all of the subjects were Caucasian. The age range for male subjects was twenty-eight to sixty-three and the female subjects' age range was twenty-five to seventy-five. The subjects' educational status was as follows: six were elementary level plus some vocational education, thirty-one were high school graduates, nine had some college level training, and twenty-four college graduates. Of the male subjects, four were divorced and eleven were married. Thirty-two female subjects were married, four were single, twelve were divorced, six were cohabitating, and one was widowed. The subjects' religious affiliations were mixed. Of the fifteen male subjects, six were non-denominational Christian, five Catholic, three Baptist, and one Methodist. The fifty-five female subjects were made up of twenty Catholics, seventeen non-denominational Christians, seven Protestants, five Jewish, three Methodists, two Baptists, and one Presbyterian.

## Procedures

The subjects were interviewed face-to-face by the same interviewer/psychotherapist. The interviews took place in the interviewer's private practice office. The subjects were asked four open-ended questions:

1. At what age did your child ask you where babies come from?
2. What was your response?
3. If you did not teach them about where babies come from when your child asked, at what age did you teach them?
4. What did you tell them specifically?

During the interview, four books were also presented to the subjects: Mommy Laid an Egg by Babette Cole, Amazing You by Dr. Gail Saltz, Your Bellybutton by Jun Nanao and Where Babies Come From by Marcin Brykczynski. The first three books were purchased in the United States and the last book was purchased in Poland. The book from Poland differed from the books from the United States in that the pictures were more explicit in regards to explaining where babies come from. The parents were shown the books and asked if they would use the books in the process of educating their children about sex.

A between subject approach was utilized where the variation comes from differences between subjects at a single point in time. The data collection occurred over the course of five months starting in April 2005 and ending in August 2005. Subjects were given an explanation of the purpose of the interviews and were informed that their names would not be disclosed in the research. Due to the nature of the dissertation topic, some potential subjects declined participation even after confidentiality was discussed

with them. Thus, the data collection process continued until there were no other subjects available to complete the interview. To minimize the possibility of interviewer bias, the interviewer reduced the interactions with subjects by asking only the four questions and collecting all information from the subject without evaluation or critiques. Sufficient time was spent with all subjects. Since the sample is not random, the results cannot be generalized to the rest of the population.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

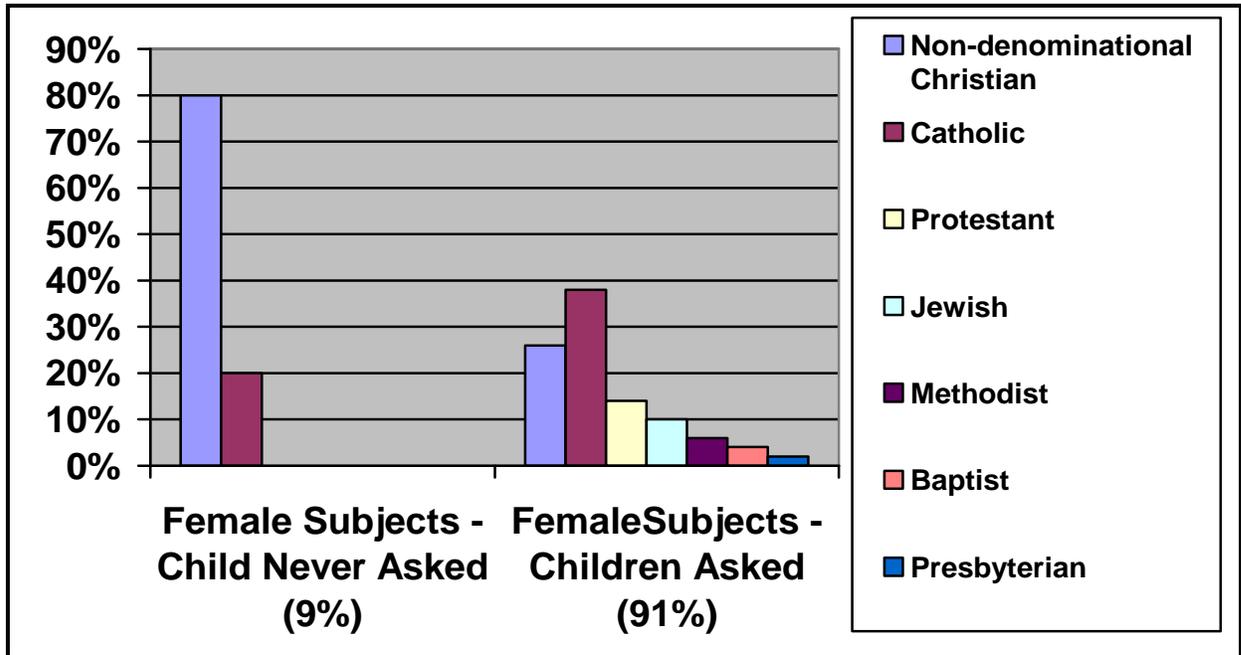
#### General Overview

Overall, in response to being interviewed, some of the subjects reported feeling embarrassed discussing the sex education they provided to their children. Subjects that knew the interviewer seemed to be more willing to participate in the interviews since rapport was already established. On the whole, the subjects reported being surprised when their children asked them where babies come from. Very often, they reported that they did not know what to say to their child or how much sexual information should be provided. They reported they did not know what sexual information is enough for children to know. It was also found that the subjects did not voluntarily provide sexual information to their children when their children did not ask them. The following results are reported in the grouping of female and male subjects.

#### Responses from Female Subjects

According to the first interview question, "At what age did your child ask you where babies come from?", 9% percent of the females subjects reported that their children never asked at all. Of this group of female subjects, 80% were non-denominational Christians and 20% were Catholic. The remainder, 91%, reported their children asked them between the ages of two and eight. This group consisted of: 38% Catholic, 26% non-

denominational Christian, 14% Protestant, 10% Jewish, 6% Methodist, 4% Baptist, and 2% Presbyterian.



The female subjects, whose children asked, were then asked what their response was to their children. A review of the female subjects’ responses showed that 36% had a biological theme to their discussion they had with their children. Specifically, these female subjects indicated they told their children that babies grow in a mother’s body, stomach or belly. For instance, one female subject reported that babies stay in a mother’s body for nine months and after the nine months, the baby leaves her body.

Sixteen percent reported they had a discussion with their children that focused on the importance of love in the creation of babies. For example, one female subject informed her seven-year-old daughter, “When a mommy and daddy fall in love, they

have babies.” Likewise, a female subject told her child, “Children come from parent’s unity.”

Interestingly, 18% seemed to combine a biological theme with the importance of unity or love of parents in their discussions. For instance, one female subject stated she told her child, “When parents love each other and they are married, they create children and that children grow inside a mother’s tummy.” Likewise, one female subject reported that she emphasized that mothers and fathers decided to have children because they love each other. She also stated that, “Children grow in a mother’s body and when they are large enough, they leave the mother’s body”.

Eight percent reported they used books to help them with their discussions. One female subject indicated that she did read a book to her child about procreation which discussed female and male reproductive organs and that she progressively provided more information according to her daughter’s age. Two female subjects specifically stated they read a book, How Babies are Made, to their children.

Four percent of the female subjects reported their discussion focused on a spiritual theme in the creation of babies. One female subject reported that she told her son, “You are a sweet gift from God.” Similarly, one female subject indicated that she told her child, “Parents pray to have children and God listens.”

Another 8% reported they were either surprised by their child’s questioning or they did not know what to say in response. For example, two female subjects reportedly changed the subject when their children asked them where babies come from. They both reportedly did not feel comfortable in discussing this subject. Two female subjects stated they did not provide any information to their children.

In contrast, 10% of the female subjects reportedly gave more detailed biological information to their children. In fact, female subject stated she told her younger children that their mother and father wanted them and decided to put their bodies together. She also stated that the mother's egg and father's sperm joined in the mother's body, where they were converted into a tiny baby. She went on to say that a baby grows for nine months in mommy's tummy and through an opening, leaves the body. Another female subject indicated that she told her children, "A small egg is placed into mother's uterus and that it grows for nine months turning into a small baby. Mommy then goes to the hospital where doctors help her deliver a baby."

In regards to the third question, "If you did not teach them about where babies come from when your child asked, at what age did you teach them?", 45% percent of the female subjects stated that they talked to their children about sexuality between the ages of six to fifteen. Some of these female subjects gave very general information while others provided more detailed biological information to their children. For instance, some of the female subjects discussed sexually transmitted disease prevention, basic anatomy and physiology, reproductive organs, but not coitus, with their teenagers. Another female subject reported that she talked to her twelve-year-old daughter about coitus and the consequences. However, she indicated that she did not feel she did a good job. Similarly, another female subject stated she talked to her fourteen-year-old son when she observed his interest in girls. She stated she was afraid he might impregnate a girl. Thus, she reported that she informed him how women really become pregnant since she had told him he was "a sweet gift from God" when he was four-years-old.

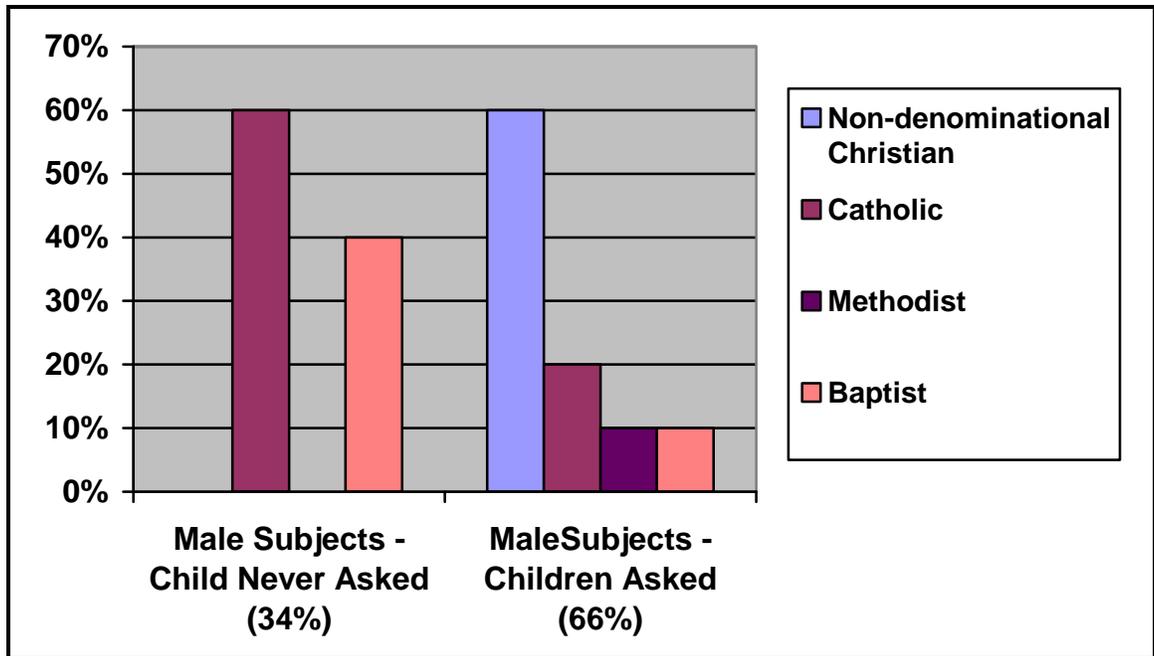
Of the 56% of the female subjects that did not talk to their children at all, 33% of this group stated they did not talk about sexuality with their children because they believed their children learned the necessary sexual information in school. Three percent reported that their children got the necessary sexual information from their family doctor. Ten percent indicated that they are planning on providing more detailed information to their children as they get older.

When these female subjects were asked what made them uncomfortable with doing this, they were not able to precisely explain their hesitation and unwillingness to describe the act of intercourse with their children.

When the female subjects were shown the four children's books on sexuality, only three reported they would use these books in the process of educating their children about sex. For example, one female subject stated she would not feel comfortable showing the pictures from the books to her five-year-old child.

### Responses of Male Subjects

According to the first interview question, "At what age did your child ask you where babies come from?", 34% percent reported that their children never asked them at all. Sixty percent, of this group, were Catholic and 40% were Baptist. The remainder of the male subjects, 66%, reported that their children asked them between the ages of four and seven. Of this group, 60% were reportedly non-denominational Christian, 20% were Catholic and 10% were Baptist and 10% were Methodist.



The male subjects, whose children asked, were then asked what their response was to their children. After reviewing the male subjects' responses, it appeared that they were more reluctant to talk to their children about coitus. In fact, 30% of the male subjects reportedly sent their child to their mothers when their children asked them about where babies come from. Two of these male subjects further discussed how they did not feel comfortable providing the information. Twenty percent of the male subjects discussed talking to their children along with their wives. For example, one of these male subjects reported that he first talked to his wife and then they both explained how children are conceived, but did not mention coitus. He stated they told their child that both the father and mother are needed and that children grow in the mother's body. Forty percent seemed to give vague responses to their children. For instance, one male subject stated he told his child, "Children come from the marriage of the mother and father," with no specifics on coitus. Ten percent reported that they did not give any response to their child at all.

If their child did not ask them where babies come from, then at what age did they teach their child? Only 20% of all the male subjects reported they talked to their teenagers (between the ages of twelve to fifteen) about anything related to sexuality. Of this 20%, sixty-seven percent reported they told their teenagers to abstain. Only one male subject reported he told his twelve-year-old son, “Children come from a woman’s body, the uterus, and when the people have sex it is when the male penis goes into the woman’s vagina.”

When the male subjects were shown the four children’s books on sexuality, all of them reported they would not use these books in the process of educating their children about sex.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Discussion**

Very often parents are asked, “Where do babies come from?” or more specifically, “Where did I come from?” by their children. Thus, these researchers wanted to know what parents were answering in response to these types of questions. Despite the vast array of resources (books, videos, pamphlets, etc.) available for parents to help parents answer these questions, our hypothesis was that parents are not teaching factual information about coitus to their children and if they are teaching their children, the information given is often vague, abstract, and very limited. Overall, the results of this study seemed to support our hypothesis. Results from the interviews indicated that very few of the parents are talking to their children about the coitus. Interestingly, none of the participating parents volunteered to initiate the discussion about procreation and coitus. Some of the parents reported being surprised when their children asked them where babies come from. Other parents reported feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable teaching their children about coitus. Many parents did not feel equipped to provide sexual information to their children. Even when the parents were shown some educational books, written for children, to help them educate their children, very few reported they would use them. Some of the parents were even concerned that providing too much information about sex to their children might arouse curiosity and lead to inappropriate sexual behavior and experimentation.

Consequently, some parents try to avoid giving direct answers to their children’s questions about sex. However, vague explanations offered by parents can lead to

children feeling that sex is bad and even produce guilt in children in the area of sexual behavior and sexuality. Thus, parents play an important role in the process of educating their children about coitus and sexuality. Parents are in a powerful position to not only teach their children about factual sexual information but also teach them the importance of sexual values, attitudes, and consequences. An example of this influence and the effects of vague explanations can be seen in the following experience by one of these researchers.

She remembers forty years ago when she asked her parents where she came from. Her parents told her that she was found in the cabbage patch. At that time, she wanted a little brother of her own because she was the only child. Sure enough, she took an investigative trip to their vegetable garden and became deeply disappointed not finding a little brother after destroying the entire cabbage section. That winter they did not have cabbage. Fortunately, she was not punished for this. Later, they directed her attention to storks, asking her to pray to the storks to bring them a baby. And again, she went chasing big birds in the field asking them to bring them a baby. This of course, did not bring them a baby, but only made some of her neighbors question her sanity and others had a good time laughing.

It is important for parents to understand that children begin learning about sexuality from birth. In fact, sex education is an ongoing process, starting when we are born and ending when we die. When children ask where babies come from, they are sending a signal that they are healthy and their sexual development is normal. It is healthy for children to wonder about sexuality and to ask questions and learn, just as they do about the other parts and functioning of their bodies. Children get sexual information

from a variety of sources. Some of these sources include their parent's or caregiver's verbal and non-verbal cues, T.V. shows and advertisements, movies, songs and music videos, magazines, the Internet, and of course, their peers. Some of this information is often misleading and can send mixed messages about sexuality. This can be very confusing for children. Thus, it is important for parents to teach even young children about sexuality. Without healthy and factual information, children can be at risk for initiating sexual behaviors with potentially negative consequences.

Giving children healthy and factual information about sexuality can prepare them to make healthy and responsible decisions in the future, especially when faced with peer pressure. A healthy understanding of their body, emotions, and sexuality can help protect them against sexual abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. It may also help them be more open to talking about sexuality and sexual issues later in life.

Based on the results from this study, there are many questions that may benefit from further exploration. First, are parents aware of their importance and influence on their child's sexual development? If they are, what is their hesitation to discuss sexual information with their children? Second, with so many resources available for parents to help them educate their children on sexual issues, why are parents not using more of these resources? Could they be unaware of the resources available to them? It is clear that further research on this subject is needed. It would also be interesting to have this study replicated on a larger scale to determine if similar results or patterns are seen. Maybe the information that is generated can then be used to develop sex education programs, for parents or other family members, that could reduce the misconceptions

about children's sexual development, increase their awareness of the resources available, and also, increase their comfort level and confidence.

# **Where do babies come from? – What do parents tell their children?**

## **Demographics:**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: ( ) single, ( ) married, ( ) divorced, ( ) separated, ( ) widowed, ( ) co-habitation

Education: \_\_\_\_\_ Spiritual/Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

1. At what age did your child ask you where babies come from?
2. What was your response?
3. If you did not teach them about where babies come from when your child asked, at what age did you teach them?
4. What did you tell them specifically?

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