

Sex education for young people

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Who shapes a child's view of sexuality today?

In today's world, it is important for both educators and parents (in the following, we will use the term educators to refer to both groups) to be aware of the environment and conditions in which the children, who we are responsible for, are growing up.

When thinking about what shapes a child's view of sexuality, many things can come to mind. Some of them have not changed for some time and have already shaped our views, others have changed significantly in recent times.

What factors have importantly shaped our views on sexuality?

- **Family**

Regardless of the era and the environment, the family has always been an important, if not **the most important, factor in shaping a person's values**. As a result, one's view of the world, and therefore one's view of sexuality, has been shaped in relation to this. To a large extent, sex education takes place in home environment, even though we may sometimes feel that this is not so important. For the purpose of this presentation, sexuality will be understood as a part of physicality that is broader than the sexual intercourse itself. In the family, the child **receives an example of gender roles**, stereotypes and relationships. It is also in this environment that most of us receive certain wounds that we can then spend decades dealing with and resolving. Parents or guardians always educate first and foremost who we are and how we ourselves react to other people.

A child who receives **positive affirmation also on a physical level** (hugs, pats on the shoulder, testing their strength, a blessing on the forehead, etc.) will find it easier to feel OK in their own body and **will find it easier to build a healthy self-image**. Also, the child will receive the first information about the relationship from the parents and, depending on how they show affection for each other, it may be normal for him to show affection by kissing, holding hands on a walk, hugging upon reunion, etc.

Of course, this may be largely lacking, and so the child experiences a great deficit in the emotional area, while also sipping information about the relationship from an unhealthy example. On the other hand, he or she may also experience physical and psychological violence, even abuse. Sexual abuse, whether it takes place within the family or not, naturally attaches many negative thoughts, feelings and messages to the view of sexuality. Disgust, shame, guilt, sadness, despair, feelings of loneliness, abandonment, unworthiness ... are all consequences of abuse and are still often encountered with adolescents and children.

- **Peers**

As children grow up and start their own path, the role of peers usually increases and the role of the primary family decreases. Before puberty, contacts with peers become more frequent and interesting and, as a consequence, have a greater influence on the child's thinking. In this time parents and educators can provide opportunities for the child to socialize with peers whose values are close to our own. According to research, it is through peers that children today most often come into contact with inappropriate sexual content.¹ If parents or educators wanted to completely shield their children from the negative influence of their peers, or to "completely wrap them in cotton wool", the approach would soon come back like a boomerang, with a rebellious child who would be completely unprepared for the real world in which he or she lives.²

On the other hand, it is nevertheless our responsibility to encourage and enable the child to have an environment that will stimulate his growth in a healthy way. There are a number of examples of good practice that can help us or develop ideas. To mention just a few: **marriage groups, family catechesis, small family communities** etc. allow both parents and children to come together and encourage each other to overcome challenges. At the same time, they bring a sense that "we are not the only ones who think like this and are struggling". **Scouts** and other organizations that address educational challenges in a holistic way and whose values are clear can play a key role in creating a safe environment within which teenagers can build strong friendships and where older peers successfully pass on knowledge and values to younger ones. **The open home** is another option that parents can use to create a safe space for their children to socialize with their peers within the home and thus have a greater influence on their peers than if their children went elsewhere.

- **School**

A lot of sexuality-related content is covered during school. Different countries have quite different ways of doing this, but in biology, if not elsewhere, the education system certainly teaches about sexual organs, reproduction. The systems are rather similar, however there are great differences among the people teaching these subjects. **Since much of this content is related to the topics that polarize our society, it is common for teachers to avoid it as much as possible, or to present only one view of the subject very actively.** Thus, it can be quite common for young people to be ignorant of the objective and holistic picture of contraception, abortion, sex reassignment despite easy access to information. Sex education provided by health institutions sometimes adds to the confusion in this area. This is because it is not known exactly what children should already know from school, what they should already know from home and what is good

¹ <https://safe.si/novice/pornografijo-na-spletu-gledajo-ze-devetletniki>

² Alexy, E., et al (2009). "Pornography Use as a Risk Marker for an Aggressive Pattern of Behavior Among Sexually Reactive Children and Adolescents." *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 14(6), pp.442-453; Svedin, et al (2011). "Frequent users of pornography. A population based epidemiological study of Swedish male adolescents." *Journal of Adolescence*, 34(4), pp.779-788

for them to learn through health professionals. If we are in one corner of this triangle, it can be assumed quickly that the other two corners will take care of certain challenges in sex education training, which is rarely the case.

- **Idols**

Children and teenagers **naturally look for other people to look up to**. 50 years ago, idols were widely transmitted through books, magazines, conversations. 25 years ago, we looked up to heroes on TV screens, and today, young people find their idols mainly online. Short videos, social networks, games ... are the entry points to the world of many idols. And it is in the area of sexuality that the messages these idols pass on can be very different. Today's influencers often enter the media world with a desire for fame and, as a consequence, tailor their messages to what is currently popular with the public.

- **Culture and environment**

There is considerable variation between countries in Europe, both formally through legislation, school curricula and informally in terms of what constitutes traditions, the extent to which religions are respected, what is expected and common practice and what is not. In this area, too, it is easy to see today not only frictions but "wars" between different views on gender. The politically dominant current places the value of **gender equality**, which is moving in the direction of so-called gender fluidity, among the EU's highest values. Here, the distinction between gender and sex, as terms for social or biological sex, is essential and absolute. On the other hand, the Christian and Islamic belief system is based on **complementarity roles of the sexes**. In the more radical, conservative strand of certain Catholic movements, there are still remnants of the Jansenist mentality and its view of sexuality, which ascribes it to a purely reproductive role, but otherwise associates it with sinfulness and impurity.

What is very different today from 20 years ago and significantly shapes children's views on sexuality?

- **Media and advertisements**

The media have always played an important role in influencing lives. Even a couple of thousand years ago, important information was transmitted in different ways. But when a particular battle was fought, e.g. in the Middle Ages, it took quite some time for the information to travel a few hundred kilometers. Today, if something happens on the other side of the world, we can find out about it just a few moments later. And recently (during the Covid crisis) we have seen how the media can also save lives and help spread information that is essential for our survival.

On the other hand, the media and the advertising industry often have their own objectives in mind (to maximise profits) rather than the welfare of the user (to receive credible and

good information). This can be quickly seen with negative news, as it is more emotionally engaging and is consequently exploited by the media.³

We are also emotionally drawn to (partly) sexualised content. Thus, we can find provocatively dressed women and men in advertisements for motorbikes, telephones, tyres, car washes... even though in normal life no one uses these products in this way.⁴

The consequences of such advertisements are that **women are increasingly perceived as mere objects** and objects for the gratification of desires. In addition to this, the devaluation of the human being has included the portrayal of sexuality as a distinctly separate component with which we can do whatever we want and it will not have a significant impact on other areas of life (emotional, spiritual, social, etc.). We know that this is not true.

- **Social networks**

Since the massive rise of social networking sites online, a correlation has been observed between the increased amount of time young people spend on social networking sites and their poorer mental health. The networks currently most used by young people (Instagram, TikTok, SnapChat, etc.) are those that encourage the use of filters to help make posts '**perfect**' or as **emotionally moving** as possible.⁵

For many young people who feel that nothing is going right for them (pimples spoil their appearance, bad luck with love, difficulty concentrating at school, problems at home, etc.) this can lead to even greater feelings of loneliness, worthlessness and poor self-esteem.

For those who feel that they won't be able to create the 'ideal' posts anyway, the search for posts that elicit a reaction from their peers may soon be on. Such posts are usually highly emotionally charged, which means that they are often related to either violence (physical, verbal, covert, etc.) or sexuality (e.g. sexting⁶). These two areas are also strongly linked to body self-image and views on sexuality. As there is much more of this online than adults imagine, it also has a greater impact on young people.⁷ The sending of sexualised images is normalized and, as a consequence, there is also a greater normalization in the view of sexuality, with behaviours that perceive the person in terms of an object, rather than someone to give oneself to and wish happiness for.

- **Video games**

According to recent studies, an industry that has grown enormously in the last decade (it is comparable to the GDP of some fairly developed countries, at around 360 billion dollars

³ <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/07/what-sort-of-news-travels-fastest-online-bad-news-you-wont-be-shocked-to-hear/>

⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/women-advertising-how-womens-sexuality-used-sell-product-sanchez/>

⁵ <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm>

⁶ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21909646/>

⁷ <https://vsitifilm.cz/about-the-film.html>

in 2023⁸), accounts for 80% of all active internet users.⁹ And where does the industry get such huge profits? The revenue dynamics have changed considerably since the industry's inception, with a large share of revenue now coming from in-game advertising and so-called "skins". **Skins are purely cosmetic features** and therefore do not change the way the game is played and do not affect its power or playability. Some skins are rarer than others. Therefore, players with rarer skins are more likely to be recognised.¹⁰

As much as \$50 billion of the gaming industry's profits are estimated to come from the area of so-called "skins", or the appearance in games.¹¹ This is real money that (young) people put into a game for the sole purpose of looking better in the digital world. On the one hand, this diminishes the importance of appearance in the real world, or establishes a dissonance between the real and the virtual world, which may become greater and greater. An interesting film that can be a great starting point for talking to young people about this topic is *Ready Player One*¹². For our topic, the questions of **how much my appearance in the virtual world means to me and how it affects my experience of reality** are relevant, furthermore, the question of **who I want to be in the virtual world** is also interesting.

The research, which partly touched on this¹³, concludes that even within the games industry there are pre-set choices and that we as a society have a lot to do with what we offer as a 'normal' choice.

The question of identity that we are addressing at this conference appears in a world that is very important to young people today, a question for which large sums of real money are paid, and sometimes lives are ended. One of the **differences between young people who have been subjected to some form of cyberbullying and those who have not is that the former group is more than twice as likely to engage in self-harming behaviour as the latter group.**¹⁴

- **Pornography**

The field of pornography has also changed dramatically in recent decades. While our youth pornography was more or less accessed through magazines and VHS tapes, nowadays, with mobile data and smartphones, pornography is virtually at our fingertips all the time.

⁸ <https://helplama.com/game-industry-usage-revenue-statistics/>

⁹ <https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/video-games-in-2023-the-year-in-numbers>

¹⁰ <https://www.videogames.org.au/skin-betting/>

¹¹ <https://coinmarketcap.com/academy/article/nfts-and-the-gaming-skins-market>

¹² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1677720/>

¹³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360719499_Having_skin_in_the_game_How_players_purchase_representation_in_games

¹⁴ <https://sprc.org/news/international-young-victims-of-cyberbullying-twice-as-likely-to-attempt-suicide-and-self-harm/>

We say that the fundamental change comes from three characteristics that make it so widespread today and result in a strong impact on adolescents. These qualities are: **accessibility, affordability and anonymity.**¹⁵

Despite the fact that in most countries there is a law restricting access to pornography to children under the age of 15, it is observed practically everywhere that we do not have good regulatory systems in place to actually prevent children from accessing it at an earlier age. Thus, as teachers and parents, it is quite realistic to expect that a child will be exposed to pornographic content around the age of nine.¹⁶

The first big problem here is that **educators most often do not talk to children about pornography.** However, since this is the kind of content that children are very interested in, the logical consequence is that pornography becomes the main teacher of sex for many people. Children most often have no other perspective or opinion.

Moreover, a large proportion of pornography **contains violent scenes**, which are accepted as normal and often even desirable. According to some data, as much as 88% of pornographic videos contain violence.¹⁷ Thus, it is not uncommon for a boy to squeeze a girl's neck during first intercourse, as this is often seen in pornographic videos and usually enjoyed by the women.

Then there is the **unreality of the sexuality depicted.** Certain porn actors have made it very clear that making pornographic videos is a job and you behave differently at work than you do at home, especially if your profession is acting.¹⁸ The average viewing time for a given pornographic scene is so short that in real sex there is no way that a person can deliver such rapid changes and, consequently, such a high level of arousal, which often also leads to erectile dysfunction in men and, above all, to dissatisfaction in the relationship.¹⁹

When we talk about the problematic use of pornography today, **the issue of addiction** is certainly relevant. While pornography is not yet officially listed as a non-chemical addiction, the ICD 11 (International Classification of Diseases) in 2023 included pornography in the list of compulsive sexual disorders.²⁰ In fact, psychiatrists and therapists at centers for non-chemical addictions point to pornography as one of the most common forms of addiction they encounter.

Pornography shows young people a sexuality that is often violent, not realistic, always within reach and not to be sought after. Because it is so widespread, its impact on views of sexuality is probably also much greater than we imagine. In fact, there is a growing number of studies that show that one of the consequences of the high presence and

¹⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8426110/>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-64451984>

¹⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178918302404>

¹⁸ <https://over18doc.com/>

¹⁹ <https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/1878756/pornography-impotent-erectile-dysfunction>

²⁰ <https://icd.who.int/en>

normalisation of pornography is a greater normalisation of **sexual abuse and sex trafficking**.²¹

As with any addiction, however, pornography is also about the search for more and more 'highs', which means more and more bizarre scenes, longer and longer viewing times, and trying out new sexual practices in real life. As a result, it is increasingly normal for the viewer to try out sexual relations with several partners, even with the same sex, perhaps even in a way of trying out the other sex himself. The confusion about identity and love that pornography brings into our world is enormous.

The role of educators - So what can teachers do?

- **Creating a safe space**

By talking about these issues, we can slowly create an atmosphere in different communities (families, classes, groups, etc.) in which young people dare to talk about these issues. In these groups, it is important not to judge the person in search of it. On the other hand, as leaders, facilitators, we have a duty to bring the truth and to speak about the issues in a holistic way and to present their consequences (even if they are difficult topics such as contraception, abortion, sex change, masturbation, etc.).

- **Regular education and learning about sexuality**

Nowadays, it is possible to follow these topics through various means (e-mails, podcasts, videos, educational programmes, books, etc.). **Knowing different perspectives on sexuality will help us to be more confident in discussing these topics** and, on the other hand, will help us to understand those who think differently from ourselves. There are many books and programmes in English that are of a very high quality and offer a lot of stories and experiences (e.g. Jason Evert and the *Lust is boring* podcast²², Dr. Bob Schutchs and Jake Khym's *Restore The Glory* podcast²³, and a project that collects a lot of content on personal identity is the *Person and Identity* project²⁴...).

For Catholic educators, it is therefore of the utmost importance to know the Church's view on sexuality. Much of this is to be found in the "**Theology of the Body**". The Theology of the Body is Pope John Paul II's holistic vision of the human person. It says that the human body has a special meaning that makes invisible realities visible and can reveal answers to fundamental questions about ourselves and our lives:

- *Does life have a purpose, and if so, what is it?*
- *What does it mean that we were created in the image of God?*
- *Why were we created as men and women? Does it really matter whether we are one sex or the other?*

²¹ <https://brainheartworld.org/>

²² <https://chastity.com/podcast/lust-is-boring/>

²³ <https://www.restoretheglorypodcast.com/>

²⁴ <https://personandidentity.com/>

- *What does marriage between a man and a woman tell us about God and His plan for our lives?*
- *What is the purpose of marriage and what is the purpose of ordained vocations?*
- *What exactly is "love"?*
- *Is it really possible to live with a pure heart?*

St. John Paul II gave extensive answers with explanations in 129 Wednesday audiences, popularly known as the "*Theology of the Body*", between 1979 and 1984.

His reflections are based on the Scripture and contain a holistic vision of the human person. By **emphasizing love as self-giving**, the reflections counter social trends that view the **body as an object of pleasure** or as **a machine for manipulation**.

Instead, they show us the body as **a calling that enables us to love in the image of God**. These and related themes are also touched upon in his previous book, *Love and Responsibility*, and in other papal documents such as *Familiaris Consortio* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

John Paul II encourages us to truly **respect the gift of our sexuality** and calls us to live it in a way **worthy of our great dignity**. His theology is not only for young adults or married couples, but for all ages and professions.²⁵

- **Example**

"Not only is example the best way to teach, it is the only way." (Albert Schweitzer)

The field of sexuality is such that each one of us feels that he or she carries a wound with him or her. And this wound affects the perception as well as imperfection in teaching others about this area. But here is the opportunity to first clarify with ourselves that we do not have to be perfect, on the contrary, it is more essential to **be able to listen to others and to be honest even when we ourselves have made mistakes**.

We often feel that we do not know enough medicine to answer children's questions and so we prefer to keep quiet. **But more than expert answers, children need someone who is trying hard and who is available to talk to them, even about difficult topics and about their own opinions and experiences**.

Whether we make an effort to address the sexual organs with appropriate words and do not shy away from topics that are interesting to children is also an essential indicator of the kind of relationship we are building and passing on to the generations to come. The use of the words penis, vagina, breasts, intercourse, penetration ... must be **respectful and courageous**, because it reflects the reality and beauty of sexuality that we want to pass on to future generations.

It is also a message of our desire to **work for the truth**. The sexual organs play a very important role in shaping our identity, and by showing the great value of language, we are also communicating a great deal about what it is that helps us to build our identity and to find meaning in life. Calling things and events by their real names helps to identify

²⁵ <https://theologyofthebody.net/>

dangers, to create a safe environment, but also to expose the lies that are increasingly present in modern society of misinformation and violent ideologies.

By respecting our bodies, we also teach children to respect their own and their neighbours' boundaries.

- **(For) Hope**

Despite the best efforts of educators and parents, **there will always be wounds** in sex education. We have all been there, and it would be utopian to expect that we can eradicate it. Nevertheless, it is right that we **try to be good enough** and trust that by doing so we will provide future generations with a foundation with which **they will be able to make good decisions**.

But we must never forget that our lives and the lives of our children are not in our own hands, but that we belong to a Father who sees the whole picture and knows from this, the broadest perspective, what is best for the individual.

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