



Parents and “Sex Ed”

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While some parents might be happy to avoid the awkward conversations that arise around human sexuality by allowing the school system to provide their children’s sex education, it is nonetheless important for parents to recognize that they are the most significant teachers and models for their own children as they mature sexually.

Instilling a healthy attitude about sexuality in young people involves a variety of considerations, including conveying a proper sense of constraints and boundaries. These boundaries arise organically through the virtue of chastity, by which a person acquires the ability to renounce self, to make sacrifices and to wait generously in consideration of loving fidelity toward a future spouse, out of self-respect, and out of fidelity to God. This critical process of developing sexual self-mastery is an area where parents are particularly well suited to help their children.

At the end of the day, the parental duty to influence in a positive way a child’s upbringing around sexuality cannot be abdicated or delegated. Parents know their children in a personal and individual way and are able to determine their readiness for, and receptivity to, sexual information. Moreover, the reality of parental love towards their

children enables a parent to say certain “hard things” in love that may need to be said, in a manner that only a parent may effectively be able to say it.

I recall the story that a middle-aged woman once shared with me about something that happened when she was 12. She was at home watching TV with her mother, who was the strong authority figure in the family. At a certain moment, a scene came across the screen where a woman was removing her clothing and dancing in front of a group of men. Her mother glanced over at her and without skipping a beat said: “I’ll kill you if you ever do that.” Her daughter understood, of course, that she didn’t mean it literally, but appreciated that her mother cared enough about her to be very direct:

“What my Mom said on that and many other occasions stayed with me for years afterwards, and helped me to reflect carefully on the right use of my sexuality.”

Parents influence their children in thousands of different ways, sometimes not even realizing how particular comments or observations they make can become

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highly significant to their child’s thinking.

Helping children to think correctly about human sexuality remains a delicate and challenging task in the midst of a sex-saturated society like our own. Indeed, our thinking about human sexuality can easily go off the rails, and sexual activity itself can quickly degrade into a selfish and self-referential kind of activity, even within marriage, if we aren’t careful to attend to deeper realities.

Spouses who have made a life-long marital commitment to each other in the presence of God are uniquely empowered to live in a way that exceeds merely viewing each other as objects or as a means to satisfying their appetites; they become called to, and capable of, a higher kind of love that involves friendship, sacrifice and self-giving.

Otherwise, a dominance of things over persons can take over, leading to forms of selfishness in which persons are used in the same way as objects are used. In the context of this kind of selfishness, a woman, for example, can become a mere “object” for a man, and children can be reduced to mere “hindrances” on the part of their parents.

The human sexual love that is

nurtured within a healthy marriage, meanwhile, generates communion between persons, as each comes to consider the good of the other as his or her own good. Marital sexuality is thus meant to go beyond merely existing with someone else and using them for selfish gain, and instead calls a person to existing for someone else through total self-gift.

As husband and wife seek to live out these truths of their human sexuality, they impart valuable and important lessons to their children about generosity, unselfish living, and chastity, where that chastity is seen as the spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness. Parents are in the unique position of being able to model for their children a healthy example of sexual integration, generosity, and self-mastery within marriage. Under these circumstances, parents also convey to their children the beautiful message that human sexuality reaches far beyond the biological, and touches on the most intimate core of the human person, particularly as experienced in his or her capacity for personal and radical self-gift to another in marriage, faithful even unto death.

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