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An Essay on Human Emotions

By June Dobbs Butts

In my early years of growing up, I wanted to know where babies came from but was having a tough time finding the right answer. My mother had been well-intentioned but distractingly vague about the subject. I felt it improper to ask my father (although I was sure he knew the answer), or my sisters, simply because they were older. My best friend had discussed it, but she too was as confused as I. So I turned to a girl who was new in our neighborhood. It was she who startled me by explaining, in about three sentences, where babies came from.

After she'd told me about "the facts of life," I murmured with a bewilderment that I still feel to this day. I thought: "Now I know all about it—that is, everything but how it *feels*."

I felt it an achievement to have learned this fortuitously, although later on I had difficulty in emotionally assimilating the news, and in fact felt guilty for having listened. My young mind construed the blunt facts of intercourse with the totality of sex and love—and somehow the *facts* seemed devoid of meaning.

Today I question whether children learn any differently. Granted, they are exposed to more information about the subject than previous generations, very few are taught that healthy emotions can be the underpinnings of one's sexuality. Sex with violence is a more popular theme than sex with joy.

I have worked for many years as an educator specializing in human emotions and more recently as a sex therapist, and I am distressed that many young people are still growing up thinking "sex is dirty." They are better informed, have more personal freedom, and become more sexually active at increasingly younger ages than in any decade in history. Yet this pejorative attitude persists—as though

they are living in a jet-age with a chariot mentality. And not all of them, of course, but a great many.

Obviously, learning the bare scientific facts will not guarantee the development of wholesome feelings. People can translate a word either into a curse or a description of lovemaking. Sex education courses should involve a working knowledge of *facts*, such as what happens in cell mitosis (like the visible portion of an iceberg); they should also deal with the vast realm of *feelings* (like the unseen bulk of an iceberg). And this is where parents come in, for the school *cannot* take the place of the home. A rudimentary knowledge of facts has to be enriched by a positive emotional outlook. Schools can teach the facts, but the home is where one first learns to express one's innate sexuality—the first testing ground for learning feelings.

Most adults have difficulty handling their own emotions when it comes to discussing sex with youngsters. They either freeze up, or talk in the abstract, as my mother did. I remember asking her specifically to explain where babies came from (shortly before my new friend blurted out her explanation) and recall that my mother was very serious and gave me her full attention. However, all I learned that day was: "lilies have seeds," for she started off by making an analogy between a woman's body and the flowers which surrounded our front porch. The conversation just evaporated, and I was content for I'd learned a curious new fact about seeds and how one could plant them.

Also, there are parents who don't even talk, who assume that their child has taken everything in stride and digested the facts of life simply because the youngster can prattle off sophisticated psychological jargon. It is the polysyllabic words which make the adults feel secure, not a display of insight on the part of the youngster, or intelligent questioning about one of life's puzzling phenomena. How can concerned adults clue into the state of knowledge of children and help

them build a frame of reference which includes but does not exploit their own sexuality?

Perhaps adults should try the following: Help the children to weed out false assumptions based on "growth" theories. All children make some conclusions on their own without phrasing them as cogent questions. They simply figure out some things for themselves.

Much of what we "reason" as young children has to be reevaluated or we continue to carry false assumptions around, like so much mental garbage. We learn to discard that which has served its purpose. Parents are often sentimental (delightfully so), and preserve their baby's first shoes in bronze. But who can hold onto the first blanket, the first safety pin, the first highchair, and the first training cup—besides, who would want to? And what about their two-year-old toys—and when would it stop? False assumptions must be uprooted and discarded for they can cripple—even stifle—proper sexual functioning in later years.

Parents should take the initiative in starting a dialogue which runs like this: "Many kids think . . ." rather than saying, "When you were little, *you* thought. . . ." By pointing out the things which "most" kids think, the child can evaluate the thought patterns without being put on the spot personally. Furthermore, most children will deny ever having thought in such archaic terms. We "forget" how we thought as babies, just as our speech improves from "baby talk" into adult conversation.

Basically, there are two false assumptions pertaining to this "growth" theory. The first one deals with food and occurs at about the age of three. Since both parents and television are figures of authority for the young child, it is interesting that both emphasize the fact that good food is good for you and makes you *grow* strong. Often children watch television while having a snack or conversing with adults at the dining table—thus the message gets double reinforcement.

Translated into sexual understanding, children start to "reason" that a baby grows inside the mother's stomach, and must have been the result of something the mother ate. The obvious fact that men have stomachs too dismisses this theory. But it takes several years before another idea occurs. By this time, around six years of age, the child has been interacting with other children and group process has set in. They've all learned that a man is crucial to the scene of making a baby. And more specifically, they've learned that "something" discharges from the male sex organ into the female organ and merges with the woman's "seed" (no matter whether they use Latin names or street language) and it is this mysterious substance which makes the baby start to develop. Being children, they can only deduce theories from the facts at hand, not the potentials. And since little boys know (and little girls can see) that urine is the only substance emanating from a boy's penis—ergo, sex is dirty *and* women are inferior. These fallacious ideas need to be uprooted from the recesses of a child's mind long before adolescence.

I have seen many people whose sexual dysfunctions stemmed directly from such false assumptions, acquired early in childhood and half-forgotten. I've worked with college students (meaning they didn't think of themselves as sick) and I've worked with clients (meaning they voluntarily came for treatment) and found that both groups had similar sexual problems.

Interestingly enough, it was the degree of unhappiness among the college students which struck me forcibly, for it belied their liberated lifestyles—i.e., co-ed dormitory living, and consciousness-raising sessions on everything from the values of bisexuality to Zen isometric exercises. Many of these young people told me that they were literally quaking in their shoes as they carried out their hip behavior. Invariably, we would get back to "growth" theories of sex, based on false assumptions. So, I now encourage par-

ents to talk openly with their youngsters. It is really a form of preventive medicine.

It is important that parents appreciate the jokes, songs, riddles and rhymes of youngsters. Most parents shut off this type of dialogue because they consider it "obscene" and are embarrassed. But, maybe the youngster didn't "get" the punch line and, recognizing the parent's superior experience, is merely asking for enlightenment. Perhaps the child was with a group of children when hearing the joke and, since they were convulsed with laughter, decided to follow the crowd but check it out later on at home.

Put yourself in your child's place—don't all of us have to struggle with the new and unexpected, and try not to lose face? I know that I, as an adult, would have to *struggle* to master the metric system which my children are nonchalantly learning in school. Each of us has built up over the years a protective psychological covering to preserve our "inner sanctum"—our own bailiwick in which we reign supreme. We don't like it when others (especially youngsters) challenge or test us. It puts us on the defensive and makes us struggle. But as a parent you *will* be challenged, and your child deserves an explanation *from you*.

I don't advocate that you analyze every pun, or strip your child of his or her precious sense of humor—I just urge parents to remember that children can laugh on cue for a variety of reasons: at nonsense as well as sense, to save face, and for tension release. Quite often the hidden sexual implication of a "double entendre" is too obscure for a young child whereas the bluntly succinct joke comes through with clarity. Shakespeare said "brevity is the soul of wit." Perhaps this is why children gravitate toward "zap comics" and other extremely literal forms of graphic art. And in contrast to the child who is testing you out of innocence, there is a different situation in which hostility predominates. Often an older child will use street language to tease a younger sibling or to embarrass grandma—and when

this happens the parent should intervene to correct the situation.

Parents should share their childhood memories and myths with their offspring. It may be amusing to discover how similar many of them are. You are really sharing your *time* when you do this. Unfortunately, this is the one intangible thing (can't be seen, heard, felt, touched, tasted, or smelled) which American parents find *most difficult* to offer their children. Many parents would rather buy their child an expensive gift than sit down and talk, reminisce, or make up word games—all "free" activities. And sharing need not be done in the manner of a guilt-ridden confessional.

A simple, on-going, flexible form of communication can establish a new level of rapport between parent and child. And the parent stands to gain even more than the child, for it is an excellent time for you, as an adult, to weed out the vestiges of those false assumptions which grew in your mind when you were a child. Like most weeds, the roots are tenacious, and continue sending up sprouts at different stages of life. So, what you came to grips with in yourself as you talked with one child may take on a different nuance with another child, or with the same child at a different stage of maturity.

Indeed, each of us has an almost innate capacity for marvel and awe in the story of our lives. Most children would rather hear about the cute little things they did when they were toddlers than any other indoor sport in the world—including being glued to the television set. And in telling our own childhood stories to the children, we help provide them indirectly with yet another kind of support system—a non-verbal sense of inner security, a reassurance that they too will live, prosper, and grow up properly. To the very young, it is difficult to believe that they will ever grow up.

There are many destructive forces in today's culture which intimidate young people and foster a sense of malaise, if not outright fear. Maybe by "levelling"

with them about our own sexual development as being a part of our lives, we can help them develop good *feelings* about the many *facts* which they will inevitably pick up. □

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