

The birds and the bees for post-Puritans

A sensible, open-minded book for parents who want their kids to have a healthy attitude toward sex -- but not have any.

By Amy Benfer

May 2, 2003 | Last week, a friend of mine told me that she had the parents I wished I'd had. At the dinner table, they advised her best friend what to do when her parents refused to let her go to prom with a black Muslim. When my friend wanted birth control, her mom went with her. They let her boyfriend sleep over. When her boyfriend started cheating on her, they were there to remind her that when you are 16, love is supposed to end.

My own parents were still pretty good, even liberal. My mother took me to Planned Parenthood while I was still in elementary school to learn everything about sex that could be covered in a PowerPoint presentation. STDs and their symptoms, birth control methods and their rates of success, abortion, anatomy, it was all there. But when actual boys started coming around, my parents made it clear that I was not to be alone with them. The message, as I remember it, went something like this: We can't stop you from having sex. If you have sex, be safe. But don't have sex in my car, my house, after school, at your boyfriend's house, in your boyfriend's car, or go to parties where you might be tempted to have sex.

Justin Richardson and Mark Schuster, authors of "Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid They'd Ask)," have a name for the condition suffered by many parents like my own. It's the "Sex is good, but not now paradox," exemplified in their book by a "typical" father, who says that his riddle of parenting is "How can I give my daughter a healthy attitude toward sex, but prevent her from having any?"

The simple answer is, of course, you can't. And why would you want to? But judging from their title, it seems the writers assume that most parents are of the don't ask, don't tell school when it comes to acknowledging their children's sexuality.

These parents are not of the Victorian era, in which children were presumed to be asexual unless corrupted by adult sexuality. They know better. These are the babies of the sexual revolution. The authors flatter their audience -- whom they assume to be adults who came of age after 1960 -- by acknowledging their hipster credentials. Sure, they agree, you had a "tube top," "pot plants in your dorm room," and ordered a drink called a "Long Slow Comfortable Screw Against the Wall." And of course you thought you would have more and better sex than your parents did before you.

Which more or less means that this a book is addressed to parents who believe that their parents' sex lives are/were boring and unenlightened, and their children's sex lives simply scary.

It's easy enough to see examples of what adults scared of their children's sex lives do to their children. Abstinence-only education is now taught in about a third of public schools, up from about 2 percent of schools in 1988. There are now programs for children who are labeled "sex offenders" while still in elementary school. Teenagers are encouraged to sign [virginity pledges](#). And it's probably safe to say that every newspaper in the country, and about half the magazines, have devoted stories to the dangers of early puberty and of [tweens growing up too fast](#), and of course, the ubiquitous story about teens having more oral sex than ever before.

Last spring, Judith Levine published a book, ["Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex,"](#) that tried to make sense of this mess, to put child and adolescent sexuality in an intellectual and historical context and warn adults that many of the policies designed to "protect" minors from sex, such as abstinence-only education, may actually harm them.

This book has none of that book's historical and intellectual heft. But it covers much of the same territory, in an instructional format. At least parents have something to give the neighbors when they call to say that your kid has been found buck naked except for a tutu, masturbating with the other 5-year-olds. Don't worry, you can say, it's normal. The nice Harvard child-development guys say so.

This book has instructions on how to make space for your child to masturbate in private ("and remember if you walk in on your child when she was doing it in her room, she was doing it privately"); what to do if your child walks in while you are having sex (one gay couple responds by saying, "Oh you found us doing the special thing that people in love do when they want to make each other feel good. Now which one of us do you want to put you to bed?"); and what to do if you walk in on your 5-year-old and her friends with their toes in other's vaginas (one father politely closes the door, while his wife responds by saying, "I thought I told you not to eat in front of the television!")

The chapter on sex games is particularly good. According to the authors, a third of all girls and half of all boys have played sex games with a peer before puberty and "Sex play before the age of five is the delightfully carefree concoction of noodlebrains who love to have their clothes off, like to see their friends naked and will try just about anything that comes into their heads," they say, before going on to list all kinds of things that noodlebrains concoct. Besides the toes in the vagina trick, there is also the game of hot dog in a bun, and the famous Barbie strip parlor. (And no, they don't believe it's Barbie's fault: "Children's sexual curiosity was probably visited on dolls long before the mid-century birth of America's compulsive shopper.") But it's nothing to worry about. "As long as your child is a willing participant, sex play itself appears harmless," say the authors. Not that some games aren't without their casualties: A Guardian writer quoted in the book remembers the time his son and the boy's cousin wrapped their willies in yellow industrial tape and had to have a hot soapy bath to get it off.

They provide a particularly hysterical primer on how to deal with less enlightened neighbors: "You know we think your tush rubbing game is fine. We spoke with Peter's

parents and the Joneses don't like it. So you can play your game with other kids, but don't play it with Peter anymore."

And when do the games stop? "When they stop feeling like games. We tend to draw a rather artificial line at puberty. After that, sex play becomes sex."

In a reversal of the usual sex education manual, the first chapter on adolescent sexuality deals with gay teens. They encourage parents to talk about homosexuality as early as they introduce any concept of sexuality, and are clear on telling parents that they don't have a vote when it comes to their children's sexual orientation. But they also assume that "most parents want their children to be heterosexual," which seems a little suspect when they include lots of gay parents throughout their book, and encourage all parents to make it clear to their children that all sexual orientations are A-OK. (Some of their examples are crazily stilted. For example, they suggest that when your 8-year-old child asks about wedding cakes, you can reply, "Some day, if you meet a girl or boy and fall in love and want to have a wedding you can have whatever type of cake you and your partner want to have.") They also have a very weird sidebar that insists that girls who come out may be simply "going through a phase," but boys who come out "are definitely gay."

But they make it clear that whatever your child's orientation, it is likely that they will have sex during high school: 50 percent of all high schoolers have had sex (39 percent of ninth graders and 65 percent of seniors.) What's more, it's likely that many parents will not know: In one study, 34 percent of parents polled said that their children had had sex. But when they asked the kids, 58 percent said they had had sex.

The standard of no sex before marriage is even more obsolete. So what is the new standard? No sex before love? ("We venture to guess that the definition of love changes rapidly as the night wears on and the temperature rises (and the third drink kicks in).") No sex before college? ("Is she different in her last week of high school than her first week of college? And what if she isn't going to college?")

The authors, as they should, shy away from making any arbitrary rules. But that's where things get messier. Sure, you want to keep your kids safe. So they have a host of suggestions on that, from deciding whether or not to buy your kids condoms (they even suggest that you make your teen put a condom on a banana in a dark room) to making sure they know all the methods and failure rates of various birth control methods.

Preventing STDs and unwanted pregnancies is good: That's something we all can agree upon. But sex is more complicated than that. They give the example of a sex educator who asks a room full of parents: "What if I could promise you that by the end of your sexual life, you would never have an STD or an unintended pregnancy, how many of you would take it?" All hands go up. "And what if that was all I could promise you about your sex life?"

The most complicated aspects of sex are not remembering to take a pill, or to pack some condoms in your purse. It's all the other things. What to do if your girlfriend's parents

freak out over your interracial relationship. What to do if your girlfriend cheats on you. What to do if you simply find you're not as in love as you thought you were. How to navigate past your first sexual relationship to your second, and fifth. (And what to do with the accumulations of ex-boyfriends.)

The authors provide no hard answers to these questions, but they do encourage parents to recognize that sex is just the beginning. Dealing with what comes after may be where teens need the best advice, preferably from at least one person over the age of 25. The real issues, as my friend's parents understood, had nothing to do with fixating on abstinence vs. virginity, or where exactly one is on the curve from mutual masturbation to oral sex to penetration. Sex isn't that simple. And once parents are able to stop worrying about Does she? or Doesn't he? they are in the best position to help their children navigate everything else.

About the writer

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