

Family Sexual Environments¹

Sex and sexuality is an issue in all homes. Of crucial importance in the sexual socialization of children is the home environment. The manner in which sex and sexuality are expressed and how parents relate to one another varies from family to family. Unspoken messages are often as potent or more potent than spoken messages actions generally speak louder than words. Parents who go to church and take their children but who also have extramarital affairs and speak falsehoods will likely have a more negative than positive influence on the sexual development of their children.

There is a range of sexual environments in families. They can range from supportive to confusing, or to destructive of healthy and natural sexuality. Think about your own home environment as you read through the following descriptions. How is sex and sexuality treated in your family?

Natural and Healthy Homes

Children are free to express and explore their sexuality, their questions about sex are answered at the level at which they are asked, and the parents are comfortable with their sexuality. Parents touch their children and each other in a loving manner. Family members are respectful of each other's emotional and physical space.

Open or Communal Living Homes

There is an open and free atmosphere regarding sex and sexuality. Sex is good, for the expression of love and caring, and not to be hidden. Nudity may be commonplace. Children are taught about sexual behaviors at an early age and are not discouraged from exploring their bodies and experimenting with others. Parents engage in sexual activities with openness and may share sleeping space with the children. Generally sexual intercourse by adults is done when the children are asleep. Literature about sexuality may be accessible to children.

Sexually Repressed Homes

Sex is not discussed. If a child asks how he or she got into the world, the stork is the answer. Parents don't speak of sex or express their sexuality in front of the children. All sex is highly private—children aren't educated about sexuality even as it regards plants and animals. Any display of sexual behaviors is met with extreme discomfort and highly discouraged. The subject of sex is taboo.

"Sex Is Duty" Homes

All questions regarding sexuality are met with hostility. Secrecy around sexuality is forced. Sex is bad, dirty, and never the subject of conversation. Children are made to think they may die or go to hell if they think about sex. Sexual thoughts are the work of the devil. People burn in hell for sex outside of marriage. Sex is only for procreation. Sexual pleasure is sinful. If children are discovered in exploration about sexuality they may be spanked, have their hands restrained from their genitals, or be very closely observed and constantly reminded that sexual play is bad and evil.

Homes with Overt Values and Covert Norms

Sex is positive and to be used to revere God. It's good and healthy to express love in a sexual way with the main goal being to have children. In some cases contraception isn't allowed. Sex outside of marriage is extremely sinful and can lead to being severely punished. Religion is intricately involved in the sexual and social lives of the family members. The overt values and morals expressed are covertly broken by the adult family members. Extramarital affairs are not uncommon and are condoned by the sect members. Abusive relationships are dealt with by the sect members and are hidden from outsiders. Males have the dominant position in the family and religion, and women and children are to follow their rules and not question their actions.

¹ From T.C. Johnson, *Understanding Your Child's Sexual Behavior*. pp. 128-132.

Sexually Overwhelming Homes

There is a good deal of overt sexuality between the parents and their friends. Pornography and other sexually explicit materials may be only minimally hidden, X-rated movies are watched by any family member present, tempers are volatile, men are dominant, women are to do their bidding, and the children aren't adequately shielded from the adults' use of alcohol and drugs.

Sexually and Emotionally Needy Homes

Sex is used as a way to meet the unsatisfied longing of the adults. Generally coming from an abusive and neglectful background, the parents in these families are constantly in search for love, caring, and companionship to fill the void they feel inside. As true love is hard for them to find among the people they attract, sex is the substitute.

Sex is often confused with love and the parents engage in sex to compensate for their emptiness. If a parent is without a partner, a child may be used as a substitute partner. While the parent is usually unaware of using the child as a substitute, the child may feel the pull to fulfill the parent's emotional and sexual needs. Substitution of the child in this role only lasts until an adult is found and then the child is put aside.

Parents using their children as substitutes may have the child sleep in their bed, go out to the movies with them, walk hand-in-hand with them, or invite them to watch television with them. The emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries in these families may be poorly managed.

Aggressive interchanges between the adults are common as the frustration of their needs is not met. One adult may hit the other adult repeatedly. Aggressive interactions between the adults and the children are frequent as the child competes for the attention of the parent and further frustrates the parents' desire to fulfill their own needs.

"Sex Is an Exchange Commodity" Homes

The parents engage in sex for money, drugs, and other things that they want or need. Children may or may not be used as vehicles for this exchange. Observation of the sexual activities by the children may occur as the parents are not generally focused on the children's needs but on their own. Physical aggression is frequently part of the environment. If the mother is a prostitute, the children may see her beaten by her pimp. Alcohol, drug abuse, and other illegal activities are frequent.

Sexually Abusive Homes

Incest by one or both of the parents occurs. In some cases one of the parents doesn't know that the other is molesting their child. In some cases one parent knows and is unwilling to step in with fervor to stop the abuse. If extended family members live in the home or visit, abuse may be by relatives.

The children who are abused rarely feel they'll get the full support of the nonabusive parent (if there is one) and so endure the abuse. In families where the children do feel they would get the support of the nonabusive parent if they told, the abuser uses threats to keep the child quiet or abuses a young child whose disclosures will be suspect. The abusive parent may use threats of aggression to keep the child quiet. In sexually abusive homes there may be alcohol or drug abuse.

Multigenerational Sexually Abusive Homes

There is concurrent incestuous activity between grandparents, parents, and siblings. Sexual behavior is by the more powerful to the less powerful. While some of the relationships may appear to be mutual, consent is impossible as sexual messages are so pervasive both covertly and overtly that the children are totally confused about sexual expression and its limits and boundaries. Members of the family use physical punishment and physical and emotional bullying as a technique to gain compliance of other family members. The rules for sex and aggression between family members have never been formulated or discussed.

Children whose sexuality is beyond natural and healthy expression may come from any of these families, but very few will come from natural and healthy homes. If they do, it would be due to having been sexually intruded upon by people outside the home.