

Lecture Topic: “Let’s Talk Sense About Sex: A Parent’s Guide to Communicating Healthy Sexuality from Toddlers to Young Adults”

Speaker: Ms. Deborah Roffman, M.S.
Sexuality Educator and Consultant
The Park School of Baltimore

Sponsor: Family Awareness Network of New Trier Township (FAN)

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Location: New Trier Northfield Campus

Attendance: 105

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SUMMARY:

Ms. Roffman’s lecture presented her theory that all children and adolescents, at all stages and ages, have the same five universal, developmentally-based needs. These needs are: affirmation, information, values clarification, limit setting, and anticipatory guidance. This Five Needs Paradigm posits sexuality as an aspect of human development that should be taught from a common-sense point of view. Ms. Roffman’s research reveals that most parents instinctually recoil from discussing sexual topics with their children, yet by re-educating themselves on the subject and adhering to the Five Needs Paradigm, confidence and clarity can be achieved even in the face of the negative influences of our hyper-sexualized commercial culture. The Five Needs Paradigm is found in any arena of development, from early socialization of very young children to issues of inclusion in adolescence. The same good parenting practices in these other arenas need to be extended to the topic of sexuality.

OUTLINE:

I. Introduction

- A. Roffman has worked for 32 years at The Park School, a pre-K-12 co-educational independent day school in Baltimore, MD.
- B. Prefers to teach sexuality in independent school environments.
 - 1. The pre-K-8 or -12 structures allows Roffman to observe long developmental spans.
 - 2. Excellent vantage point to witness the cultural changes that occur over time – always being educated.
 - 3. Prefers a curriculum created in partnership with students, for and about them. “Listen first and lesson plan second.”

II. Why Parents Matter

- A. Kids haven’t changed – the world has. The fundamental needs of children and adolescents have remained the same.
- B. Decades of research have shown repeatedly that parents matter.

1. When sexuality is openly discussed at home, children grow up healthier and more slowly, with less risky behavior and a sense of connectedness.
2. Parents need to bring the topic of sexuality into the “spiral of learning,” more and more increasingly sophisticated information.

III. Obstacles to and Advice for Effective Communication

- A. Why is sexuality a difficult topic for most parents?
 1. History of family silence on the subject.
 2. Unable to think systematically on the topic.
 3. Coded language (“pee-pee,” etc.) employed rather than factual.
 4. Perceived “innocence” of children.
 5. Embarrassment.
 6. Many parents feel that if they talk about sexuality with their child, then their child will have sex.
- B. Most schools are four to six years late in teaching basic facts about reproduction.
- C. It’s vital to raise your children in the century that they’re living in.
- D. Good parenting skills will transfer to discussions of sexuality.

IV. The Five Core Needs of Children and Adolescents

- A. Affirmation
 1. Parents need to learn about the various developmental stages of children in order to be effective.
 2. Employ “active listening” strategies, and remain non-judgmental.
- B. Information
 1. Giving your child information about the culture they inhabit is a nurturing, daily process.
 2. Children/adolescents attend “sex and gender” school every day. They are constantly exposed to peer pressure and commercial messages defining “successful boys” and “acceptable girls.”
 3. Parents need to be aware of this gender inculcation and encoding.
 4. The marketing to gender roles by corporations is not good for building character, expressing empathy or establishing relationships.
 5. Parents sometimes ascribe a disruptive power to sexual knowledge that is incorrect and inappropriate.
 6. Sexual knowledge should not be feared, but we need to learn how to deliver it.

C. Values Clarification

1. Children/adolescents can be likened to “Martians” plopped down in a complex culture. They have difficulty providing context for the unending stream of messages and images coming at them.
2. Parents are cultural interpreters for their children.
3. Parents need to name the values that they want their children to value. Too many times we don’t name the values that are behind the rules.

D. Limit Setting

1. Limits are “oxygen” to children.
2. Parents have abdicated all responsibility for setting limits these days, and often can’t recognize the differences between adult and child.
3. The absence of limits is pervasive – language, nudity, TV, privacy, curfews, clothing.
4. Parents should reflect on a “crib” as a metaphor. The infant’s world is closely circumscribed, and with the passing years is gradually expanded, but always with parameters.
5. Why is there such an absence of limit setting? Because we’re influenced by culture and the effects of mass-marketing. Also, it’s part of a post-60’s fallout. The 60’s generation threw out old ways of thinking about sexuality and hasn’t replaced them with anything.

E. Anticipatory Guidance

1. Children/adolescents aren’t very good at anticipating problems.
2. Difficult to fight peer culture and/or popular culture by yourself. Parents need to become expert at stages of development.
3. Parents need to talk with their children about current events that are either directly or tangentially connected to sexuality.
4. Homosexuality can be discussed with children around age 5.
5. Actively use the word “intimacy” from age 2 to establish the concept in your child’s mind.

V. Conclusion

A. Sexual intercourse is the most powerful behavior in the world.

1. It has the power to create life, take life away, and change lives.

B. Children and adolescents are prime targets of the advertising and entertainment industries.

1. Parents must counter with clear communication of values and the creation of a safe, healthy environment through setting appropriate limits.