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TEACHING YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEX



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By James P. Carroll

Once upon a time, the Christmas toy catalogue was a bland volume, a sugar-plum book of rocking horses and teddy bears. But now things have changed. Oh, the tea sets and the stuffed animals still are represented. But they've had to move over; they've had to make room for page after page of big-busted, boy-baiting female dolls.

These are not the dolls of other years. These are not sweet cuddly babies or bright, button-eyed toddlers. Oh, no. These are plastic copies of the Hollywood "starlet." These are fashion-obsessed and boy-crazy. By any objective standard, they are about as lovable as a two-pound tarantula.

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Yet, these dolls sell. And today they occupy places of honor in the bedrooms and playrooms of hundreds of thousands of little girls.

If you own such a doll, you can begin your play by getting her dressed for a date with her handsome, plastic boy friend. The dressing starts with what the catalogue describes as "lovely lingerie." Over this goes the strapless "romantic gown." And, to top the costume in proper style, there is an \$8 genuine mink jacket. When the boy friend arrives, he may be wearing his "campus cords" or a sparkling tuxedo. And he may invite his mink-covered girl to a cardboard replica of either the college sweetshop or a drive-in movie.

Advertising, TV and Trouble

The stop at the drive-in may be innocent. But don't count on it. Most little girls—or at least many of them—read the movie ads in their home-town newspapers. They see the television commercials featuring glamorous actresses who run their fingers through male hair made irresistible with some new vitaminized, lanolized brand of hair grease. Little girls of this generation—and little boys, too—have been taught in dozens of different ways that physical attractiveness is the essence

of sex, that physical attractiveness can solve all human problems.

To achieve physical attractiveness, you must smoke mentholated Philtos and apply generous quantities of deodorant. Then you'll be handsome, gorgeous, famous, rich and powerful. You'll be surrounded by admirers. You will begin to believe what our society constantly teaches, that sex is a fun thing, a thing that hasn't the slightest connection with reason or responsibility or with marriage. You will be moving toward full membership in a group that thinks of itself as totally happy because it is totally unrestrained by the regulations of the past.

Of course, the claim of total happiness isn't supported by the facts. The truth is that we live in a world of deep distress, of broken marriages, of grinding loneliness, of letters to Ann Landers and trips to the analyst. All of the evidence indicates that the common, current view of sex is phony and misleading, that we have been sold a gold-plated cardboard cutout, a shadow that has kept us from seeing the multi-sided shape of the real thing.

Sex Was Created, Not Invented

Many of today's men and women have forgotten that sex is powerful. It is the

fuel that propels us in many of our most meaningful activities. It is the framework that supports the family. It is the elemental force at work in the complicated world of men.

Real sex wasn't invented for television or the movies or the cheap novels. It can't be purchased in boxes or bottles or tubes. It can't be added to the human personality; it can't be stuck on or hung on like so many false eyelashes or false anything else. Sex has been the human heritage—and the human joy—since God created male and female.

Again and again in Sacred Scripture, God affirmed the importance of sex in His plan for His children. In the Old Testament, He commanded men and women to mate, to make use of their power to share in His work of creation. In the New Testament, He made the intimacy of marriage a symbol of His closeness to those He loves; He is the bridegroom united with His bride the Church.

God Didn't Make a Mistake

In countless ways, the God who created sex has endorsed it and blessed it. From this we know that sex is good and right and holy. We understand from this that we should avoid not sex but the misuse

of sex. Yet, even though we understand, we are frequently torn by uncertainties. We have trouble shaking off guilty feelings about sex. We may even find ourselves thinking that sex is something dirty, something that somehow reveals the "animal" side of human nature. We may have a vague feeling that God somehow made a mistake, that the race of men would have been better off without sex, that new babies should have been made available in a special department of the neighborhood supermarket.

These attitudes are a hangover from childhood. They are unfortunate reminders of a time when parents tried to pretend sex didn't exist. They are thin echoes of an age when sex was locked in the bedroom and when babies were flown down chimneys by superstrong and super-sanitary storks. It is a tragedy that these echoes still produce discord in marriages. It is an even greater tragedy that our children are beginning to hear and respond to the same echoes.

Sex Can't Be Ignored

In many of our homes, we are teaching our children that sex is unfortunate. We are teaching them that sex is something to be ignored or stifled or, if it is at all

possible, suppressed forever. We treat sex in negative terms; we surround this tremendous human power with an ugly stockade of "thou shalt not's." We treat sex as something mysterious; we answer questions with a curt "wait until you're older." We treat sex as something that should be avoided like the measles or chicken pox; we go to elaborate lengths to eliminate every suggestion that the physical relationship is an important part of married love.

Usually, we parents teach these things not by what we say, but by how we act. We are embarrassed about public displays of affection even when the public in question is a three-year-old busily smearing his oatmeal on the breakfast table. We sneak our good-bye kisses or we eliminate them altogether. We restrict our hand-holding and our hugging to the protective secrecy of absolute darkness. By our actions, we teach our children that sex is not part of marriage, that marriage is a sterile, contractual arrangement with all the warmth and tenderness of an eight-foot stack of law books.

Sometimes we do reveal our negative attitude toward sex in our words. We start our chorus of "no! no!" and "naughty! naughty!" when our children are in their

cradles. And we keep up the rhythm until our little ones have matured into full-sized victims of a full spectrum of mental tortures. Then, years later, we sit in our spotless homes wondering why the marriages of our grown-up babies turned into such grubby collections of unhappiness.

Hinders Child's Growth

The trouble with the negative approach is that it interferes with the child's emotional development. It makes it more difficult for the child to reach the maturity that is essential to a happy marriage. This is the maturity that grows slowly and delicately out of the experience of living; it can't appear automatically at the moment of marriage. And young men and women can't possibly have mature ideas about the role of sex in God's plan if they've been told again and again that sex is ugly and dirty.

Some psychologists say the problem is especially difficult for girls. This is because the negative conditioning often is strongest with girls. The thought of premarital pregnancy is more than most parents can bear. So, they make a special effort to teach their daughters to react with an emphatic "no" to all thoughts that involve

all phases of sex. They erect a great negative wall that shuts off their daughters from every suggestion that sex in marriage is marvelously right and good. Engrained in the minds of the daughters is a commitment to defend their virginity, to guard their purity, to protect themselves. This attitude of defense is all they understand about sex and about themselves.

Then comes the wedding day. And all at once the negatively trained girls are supposed to forget a lifetime of self-discipline. All at once they are supposed to forget their defenses. They are supposed to suddenly feel gloriously happy about giving themselves in marriage's selfless act of total love and total generosity. For many girls this is difficult. For some it is nearly impossible. And how can the young husband be expected to understand? How can he comprehend the icy reluctance of this bride of his? How can he come to the realization that this lovely girl was warped by perhaps generations of negativism and guilt?

Anti-Puritanism No Answer

Of course, not all parents show their guilty feelings about sex in negative terms, in the language and attitudes of a modern-day Puritan. Some go to the opposite ex-

treme by becoming militant, relentless anti-Puritans. These fanatics pull out all stops in informing their youngsters at the earliest possible age about the greatest possible variety of sexual behavior. Such parents really are convinced that pure, naked knowledge is the answer to the problem of sex. They even believe that boys and girls who understand the mechanics of pregnancy automatically will avoid all of the situations that customarily make pregnancy almost inevitable.

The anti-Puritans make their children encyclopedias of sex information. They cram the minds of their children with the details of normal and abnormal practices. And quite often they are so busy cramming that they forget all about motivation; they teach the what's and the how's of sex but they ignore the why's.

Christian Sex Is Based on Love

The parent who wants to be truly Christian will avoid the radicalism of both the Puritan and the anti-Puritan. The truly Christian parent will stay away from the world of the negative, the shall not; he also will stay away from the world of the tell-them-all-and-all-will-be-all-right. The truly Christian parent will base his sex education program on a concept that



transcends sex, a concept that is the root of the Christian message, a concept that contains the force that can transform all of creation. This concept, this force, is called love.

The sex education program based on love must begin with the parents themselves. They must try to understand that sex is both good and necessary. They must erase all of their ideas that the body is some sort of brutish beast that must forever be flogged into chaste obedience by a pure and shining soul. They must realize that body and soul aren't stuck together like the layers of a jelly sandwich; they are united almost like the hydrogen and oxygen in a drop of water. This realization is important to the understanding of the place of sex in marriage; when a husband and wife make love, they are not surrendering to some primitive impulse of the body; they are expressing their love in a way that embraces every facet of the human personality.

Sacramental in Character

Parents who understand the sacramental nature of marriage have taken the first vital step in the sex education of their children. In marriage, parents can show the fullness of human love. They can show

how human love is a reflection of God's love for all creation. They can reveal to their children that marriage—and the sex relationship that belongs in marriage—is joyous proof of God's loving concern.

The message of love must be brought to our children when they are infants. It must be repeated thousands of times as they mature. We must show them that they are secure in God's love. We must stress to them the beauty that is in all that God has made. We must help them understand that tenderness and affection must be ruling qualities in their lives.

This is subtle home teaching. But it can have lifelong results. For one thing, it can impress on children that sex and marriage are mixed and blended and molded together. They will begin to associate the fact of the male-female relationship with the fact of marriage. Such an association is a powerful bar to extramarital sex experimentation. And such an association can't possibly form in the mind of a child without the influence of his home.

Home Is School of Love

In sex education, as in many other kinds of education, the home is the number-one teacher. It has this rank because parents were given their commissions as teachers

by God Himself. And this commission goes into effect not when the children are old enough to board the school bus or walk to school; it goes into effect when they first see the light of day. The entire process of family life is an educational experience. It can be a valuable lesson if we parents will try to consciously remember our role as teachers, if we will try to remember that our words and actions will help shape the lives of our children for years to come.

If we want our children to have healthy attitudes toward their own sexuality, we can't wait for them to see a movie or read a book. We can't wait for the subject to come up in a biology class. We can't wait for the workings of the formal system of education. We must act because sex information—correct and incorrect—is available on every street corner and playground. And it is becoming available to younger and younger children.

Reluctant Parents Abdicate

Teachers and clergymen are well aware of the rapid spread of sex information among younger and younger children. The same authorities also know that many parents have refused to accept their responsibilities as educators. So, elaborate programs of sex instruction have been put

into operation in schools and educational centers. And this has created a spiraling problem: The availability of formal sex instruction has played into the hands of reluctant parents; and, as the reluctance grows, the professional educators have tried to fill the vacuum with more and more formal programs of instruction.

Most of the professionals know that formal classroom instruction is not the answer. Sex is more than an academic subject. Its essence cannot be captured in a slide film or textbook. Classroom instruction can provide technical details. It cannot translate those details into the meaningful events of the life experience.

Classroom instruction in sex also is handicapped by the individuality of the students. Each one is different in terms of physical development, emotional maturity, intellectual capacity and home environment. There is no way to adapt a lecture or a series of lectures to these differences. There is no way for a teacher or principal to tell when a student—or a room filled with students—is ready for sex instruction.

This doesn't mean that classroom sex instruction is necessarily bad. Information on the physique and the psychology of the human species can be transmitted in an academic setting. And, unfortunately,

many youngsters will receive their only ungarbled sex information from their schoolteachers and guidance counselors and, perhaps, from their clergymen. But this need not be the case for most children. It must not be the case for your children.

Think of Your Own Case

If you doubt the importance of telling your own children about sex—of telling them about sex in the context of married love—then think about your own childhood experience. Chances are that you learned a few broken, warped, disjointed bits of information. These came from your equally ignorant friends. But you didn't know they were ignorant; the things they said worried you a lot. The sidewalk description of the sex act was savagely crude. You couldn't picture yourself wanting to do such a thing. Worst of all, you couldn't imagine the sex act as a part of the married life of your parents. They were "too nice." They wouldn't. They couldn't. Or, you asked yourself time and again, could they?

Surely we want better than this for our children. Surely we must be ready to take advantage of their natural curiosity. We must be ready to end their doubts before they get started.

Perhaps our first chance will come when our toddler discovers the existence of his sex organs. This is a perfectly natural and quite neutral experience. Unfortunately, some parents use this experience to kick off their program of negative training. They show their displeasure with a sharp command or a slap of the hand. By so doing, they have begun the building of a tower of guilt in the mind of their child.

Telling the Facts

There really is no need of this. Very small children can be distracted out of their interest in their genitals. Older children can be told, gently but firmly, that the organs of sex are not toys but special, important parts of the human body. They are the parts that God created so that we could help Him in His work of creation.

It is quite possible that this sort of discussion will lead to other questions about sex. Perhaps the child will want to know the differences between boys and girls. Perhaps he will want to know the answer to the classic question: "Mommy, where do babies come from?"

Sometimes the first questions are not so pointed. The child may begin by talking about jet airplanes or fishing and,

almost before the parent realizes it, the conversation may have turned to the function of the female breast or the size of the neighbor lady's tummy.

For the preschool youngster—so very much interested in everything about himself—millions of sex-related questions are possible. And to each, fathers and mothers must be prepared to give frank, honest and realistic answers. They must never be too busy to attempt a reply. They must never say, "Ask your mother" or "Ask your father." Parents also have to guard against showing displeasure, or laughter, when their children have trouble expressing themselves. Parents must try never to be too scientific in their answers. Instead, they must do their best to tailor each answer to the understanding of the child.

Use Concrete Terms

Parents have to recognize the fact that small children do not think in abstract, dictionary terms. They think in the concrete, the here and now, the actual, the real. They have difficulty transferring a truth from one situation to another. When they learn all there is to learn about the sex habits of rabbits or cats or dogs, they may or they may not know some little thing about the sexuality of humans. They

need to be told in concrete terms. They need to have every answer laid out in the boldest and sharpest strokes.

It also is disconcerting to realize that even the best answer has to be repeated dozens of times. Children are like that. Teaching them demands patience because they demand repetition. They want to be assured and reassured about each bit of information before it is permanently tucked into their memories.

The First Questions

The first questions quite often come when the child is three or four. Quite often he wants to know where he himself came from. The answer can be quite simple: "You grew in a special place inside your mother." Often that answer will end the discussion, at least temporarily. But occasionally a child will ask an additional question: "Why?" And he probably will be satisfied if he's told this arrangement is part of God's plan: "This is how God created us."

Later, he may get to wondering how the baby escapes from inside his mother. Again the answer is direct and simple: "When he's big enough and strong enough to live outside the protection of his mother, he comes out through a special

opening in his mother's body." Still later, more details will have to be supplied. But they should never be supplied before the child is ready for them.

In all this teaching, mothers and fathers should make a special effort to avoid the grotesque names that so often are attached to the parts and the functions of the human body. Call things by their proper, scientifically correct names. These aren't too difficult for little ones. They can master words like astronaut and dinosaur. Surely they will have no trouble with penis and vagina. And the use of the correct names can save a good deal of confusion and embarrassment in later years.

The first question about the role of the father in the process of procreation may come when the child is six or seven. He may ask why there has to be a daddy in a family. He may wonder how he can be certain that he is his father's son. And he is entitled to an answer that will tell him that Daddy and Mommy together cooperate with God.

He can be told that sometimes when Daddy and Mommy love each other very much, Daddy places a seed in Mommy. If God wills it, this seed joins with an egg inside Mommy and from this union comes a new baby. Sooner or later, the child

will ask how the seed gets placed inside his mother. The first answer must stress the union of love. Then, as the child grows ready, the answer must be expanded. The child must be told that in the ultimate act of married love, an act of such holiness and importance that God reserved it for the privacy of marriage, the father's penis actually enters the body of the mother; they become two in one flesh.

In Terms of Love

The child who learns of the marriage act in terms of love will not be shocked or offended. He will think of it just as it is—a marvelous gift from a God who opens His hands to shower blessings on every creature.

The boy with such preparation will not be scarred or smudged by a universe of ugly jokes and sordid stories. He will understand his own feelings. He will know why his heart beats a little faster when he sees the shape of a pretty girl. He'll praise God for this reaction, this sex drive that is God's gift. And at the same time, he'll praise God for helping him understand that the power of sex should be reserved for the high act of worship called marriage.

The girl prepared for marriage in terms of love will be ready to give herself fully, completely, without reservation. She will be free of the tortures of guilt and doubt. She will understand that the essence of love is giving. And, because she understands, she will have an important reason for saving herself for the lifetime of total giving that is the joy of husband and wife.

Young people who know that the sex act is the crowning expression of married love can come to understand the significance of celibacy. They can understand that the virginity of the priest or Sister is not the rejection of something evil but the consecration of something good.

Each in His Own Time

Each child has his own timetable for learning about sex. One may be passionately interested in himself and his family at the earliest possible age; he may be spouting questions almost from the time he begins to talk. Still another child may have no questions until he suddenly begins to wonder why his mother's stomach seems to stick out. As a general rule, curiosity hits a peak during the years just before the start of school and continues through the first grade or two.

Then there is a lull, a dormant period, until glandular changes start to signal the start of puberty. With this process of maturing, there is another, completely understandable, upswing in interest in sex.

No Questions?

Unfortunately, there are some youngsters who never get around to asking any questions. These are a special problem. For one thing, the fact that they don't ask certainly can't be interpreted as a lack of interest. They may not ask because they can't seem to find the right words or because they never seem to have the proper occasion or because they have had some experience that taught them, rightly or wrongly, questions on sex simply aren't welcome.

With the children who don't ask, parents have to be especially helpful. They have to try, as diplomatically as possible, to bring up the subject of sex. They have to try to draw questions from their children. They have to use every possible opportunity—the birth of a baby, a nursing mother, a newspaper headline—to begin a discussion on sex. This will seem forced and difficult and uncomfortable. But it also is necessary. The shy child is entitled to the same frank preparation as his brash

and uninhibited brother or sister. He's entitled to a preparation in the loving atmosphere of his own home.

Girls And Menstruation

For girls, the process of preparation is likely to be completed at an earlier age than for boys. Girls mature when they are younger, perhaps two or three years younger. And before they mature, girls should be given some information on menstruation. Many authorities believe this phase of the sex education process should be completed when the girl is nine or 10.

The job of teaching about menstruation quite obviously belongs to the mother. She has had the necessary experience. But she also needs a certain amount of technical knowledge. Fortunately, excellent printed material is available on this subject at the public library or the bookstore. In addition, the family doctor and the school nurse are available for any necessary explanations.

The important thing is to make the girl, your daughter, secure in the knowledge that menstruation isn't filthy or "the curse." It is as natural as perspiration or tears or laughter. It is another element in God's plan for these children He loves.

Boys And Masturbation

When the boys of the family start to show the first signs of maturity, it's time for Dad to get into the education act. He should be prepared to tell his sons the meaning of the strange new things they are experiencing, the pleasant new sensations, the erections, the nighttime discharges. He should be prepared to lead a discussion on masturbation. This last is tough for most fathers. But, like many tough things, it is very necessary. Many boys in their early teens really don't realize the significance of masturbation. They need the counsel of their fathers. They need fathers who will avoid all of the ridiculous threats of hellfire and damnation. They need fathers who will sympathetically explain that the power of sex was given men so they could express their love for others, not merely their love for themselves.

Too Much Education?

Sometimes it is argued that the explicit instruction of boys and girls in sex increases the possibility of experimentation with sex. One basis for this argument is the often documented increase in school-girl pregnancies, an increase that coincides with the increase in availability of

sex information. But while these statistics are interesting, they scarcely prove that sex information is a bad thing. In fact, the whole argument is like claiming that an upswing in traffic accidents is a result of expanded programs of driver education.

The answer to today's sex problems is not the elimination of sex education but the creation of the kind of sex education that is more meaningful, more thorough, more soundly based on the moral values shaped by God's love. This kind of sex education has to be the responsibility of the parents. It has to begin when the children are young. It has to continue through the school years. It has to equip young people for life in an age that seems packed with the most fantastic notions about sex relationships. It has to teach them that these notions, not sex itself, need to be uprooted or transformed.

Boy-Girl Obsession

A good example of a fantastic notion about sex is today's cult of popularity. This is the obsession of so many parents with the sexual attractiveness of their children. They want their children to be popular with members of the opposite sex. They want them to be dated, courted, chased. You can see this cult of popularity

reflected in the pocket mirrors of hundreds of thousands of grade-school girls. You notice it woven into the nylons on skinny little legs or the uplift bras on flat little chests. Worst of all, you notice it in the early boy-girl social events that are the established pattern in the schools and organizations of community after community.

Fathers at Fault

Quite often mothers get the blame for the grown-up dressing and dating habits of their children. "They want their daughters to have all the popularity they feel was lacking in their own childhood," the story goes. And it is an interesting story. But it tends to ignore the fact that fathers make their own contribution to the sorry situation. Too often they view the supervision of their children as "something mother takes care of." They love their children, and their wives; they also love the indifference that shields them from all the agonies of household decision-making. Without the support of their husbands, many wives feel themselves inadequate for the job of resisting social pressures. They give in because "everybody's doing it." They surrender their responsibility to their own children.

The first few surrender episodes may be trying. But the father of the family is busy with his television. And everybody in the neighborhood seems to be in agreement. So why not give in? Why not let little Susie or Jeffy go on the hayride—or “go steady”?

Surrender Becomes Comfortable

Eventually the process of surrender becomes comfortable. Practices that once seemed questionable now seem perfectly right and proper and respectable. Sooner or later, they may even seem enjoyable. Without really knowing how it happened, mothers who once were mild objectors become priestesses in the cult of popularity. They find themselves arranging the Christmas formal for the junior high school and they honestly enjoy themselves.

There are parents who delight in seeing their sixth-grade girls escorted off to a school dance by an awkward youngster who would feel a good deal more at home on a basketball court. These parents don't seem to see the danger. They don't seem to understand a child's low threshold of boredom. They don't seem to realize that the child who dates in sixth grade will demand new adventures in seventh grade or eighth grade. And what will these ad-

ventures be? When will talk and holding hands and a good-night peck seem terribly tame? When will the normal, natural sex drive — stimulated and encouraged for years—demand the ultimate? When will the young couple discover it's too late to turn back? When will they learn that sex is too strong, too deeply ingrained in human nature to be put off by a few good intentions?

The inevitable results of our present pattern of boy-girl relationships are frequent pregnancies and too early marriages. But these are not all. The rest of the sorry record is being written in the divorce courts and the mental health clinics.

Admittedly, it's difficult for concerned parents to do much about the weird social customs that currently seem so attractive to so many men and women. But still the concerned parents must try. They must do what they can to slow the early dating trend in their own neighborhoods.

Bucking the Tide

This certainly will not be easy. But it is not impossible, either. In every community there is a reservoir of objection to attempts to hasten the growing-up process of boys and girls. But this reser-

voir is hidden. It can become an effective source of strength only if it is brought into the open, only if it is tapped to provide an effective, organized effort to slow the runaway boy-girl socialization process.

When you voice your opposition to the established pattern of dating or dancing or what have you, you certainly won't be cheered by all of your friends and neighbors. You may even find yourself high on the community hate list. But chances are you also will find that you have some support. You will find that a few parents will come forward to express their agreement with you. You will discover that some of these parents have been waiting for years for one of their number to reveal the necessary courage and leadership.

Unexpected Support

You also may find some unexpected support from school officials. Many teachers and principals object to school-based dancing and dating for grade-school children. Many would love to abolish the ridiculous styles that sometimes attempt to make fifth-grade girls look like a blend of all the objectionable characteristics of a hundred jet-set sexpots. These school officials see firsthand the trouble that

comes from the continuous pressure to stimulate the sex interest of youngsters. But often the schoolman feels helpless. He doesn't want to be identified as some sort of 19th-century nut. He doesn't want to assume the responsibility of disrupting social patterns that seem almost traditional. He quite rightly feels that his actions and efforts will be meaningless without the backing of parents.

When even a few parents ask for his help, he usually is heartened and encouraged. He may even feel that he owes it to the children in his school to take the necessary action.

In all their efforts to swim against the tide of conformity, parents must be careful not to become offensive and overbearing. The cause of reason isn't served by unreasonable words and actions. Parents also must realize that their efforts aren't likely to bring about an overnight overturning of community attitudes. That's expecting too much. It may even seem that months and months of struggle result in no observable amount of success. This is discouraging, heartbreaking. But it is no cause to give up the fight.

Keeping the Homefront

If you are rebuffed in your neighbor-

hood, you have an obligation to your children to keep up the battle at home. You must do this even at the risk of having your whole family identified as "different." This you can understand when you realize you are different. You were made different by Baptism. You were called to witness Christ in modern America just as Peter and the others were called to witness Christ in ancient Palestine. Everyone said the Apostles were different from the other men of their day. And this difference was their glory, their hold on history, their link with God Himself.

Being different today doesn't mean wearing funny clothes. It doesn't mean shutting ourselves off from the world. The world needs us just as it needed Christ and His Apostles. The world needs the example of our Christian testimony. It needs our idealism. It needs our clear understanding that sex isn't cheap or commercial or commonplace.

Getting this idea across to children is never easy. They do tend to conform, to take the route that involves the minimum amount of unpleasantness and controversy. But parents can help by trying to provide enough recreational opportunities, opportunities that do not enlarge the boy-girl relationship. Sports are important here. So

are music, discussion groups, reading, volunteer activities. Some parents have found that the time of puberty when sex interest takes an upward swing is an ideal time for introducing young people to their obligation to be apostles. Every Christian has this calling and young people can answer in their schools and playgrounds. They can answer by making a conscious effort to bring Christ to their world.

In many parishes there are organizations — the Young Apostles and the Young Christian Students are examples — that serve to introduce young people into the apostolate. But these organizations can do nothing without the active endorsement of the parents.

Much Talk, Little Understanding

At the same time, parents must try to make children ready for the complexities of an age that talks much about sex and understands little. They must try to develop in their children a sense of compassion for the young people who surely will make terrible mistakes. If we're realistic about the power of sex, we know these mistakes can happen. Because we know, we stay away from the frightening stories about the punishments due "fallen" men and women. We make it clear that

sins involving sex, like all other sins, are subject to the mercy of an understanding and forgiving God.

We show our children with our own lives that what counts is not the rules and the regulations, not the techniques and mechanics and details. What counts is love, the human love that brings the power of divine love into our marriages, the human love that makes radiant the home, that glows with the glory of Christ's victory over sin.

Father in heaven, You prepared a wedding feast for Your Son. Let us and our children share in this feast, now and forever, Amen.

NIHIL OBSTAT—John L. Reedy, C.S.C.
Censor Deputatus

IMPRIMATUR—✠ Most Rev. Leo A. Pursley, D.D.
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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