Sexuality education for children and pre-schoolers in the information age

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All children have the right to have sexuality education in order to enhance their self-understanding, their developing maturity and their self-concept. In the past, parents and some schools have provided this, usually as formal school programs. However, many children receive sexuality education informally from other sources such as peers, television, magazines and books. The technology available in the information age provides yet another source. The Internet has a growing number of sites specifically for sexuality education for children and pre-schoolers. Here, a selection of relevant sites is identified and presented for their developmental appropriateness. The opportunities these promote are almost limitless for children's enhanced personal understanding and knowledge-base upon which further development will occur in their teenage years and beyond.

All humans are sexual not only from birth but from when they were developing in the womb. Sexuality is a concomitant characteristic of being human. Sexuality is part of us from conception to death. Thus, with such an enduring part of our being, any knowledge and understandings we can gain about it will undoubtedly be self-enhancing and personally rewarding, resulting in an increased quality of life for all through, particularly, improved personal understanding and enhanced inter-personal relationships (Goldman & Bradley, 2001). Humans are never entirely sexually literate or 'sexerate' (Goldman & Goldman, 1981a; 1981b; 1982), and their need for enhanced sexuality information and sexual understanding grows as they develop.

Children have the right to sexuality education. The education of any child is incomplete unless he or she understands human sexuality (Goldman & Goldman, 1988a; 1988b). Within the human lifecycle, puberty is a time of accelerated physical, sexual, psychological and social changes for young people, while menopause and andropause are times of modification. The provision of sexual knowledge and skills over the lifecycle is advantageous for well-rounded developmental growth. In contrast, sexual ignorance can be disastrous and result in unwanted pregnancies, rape, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, and unhealthy attitudes to human sexuality at any age. In fact, there is an increasing demand for sexual health to be seen as a basic human right (Coleman, 1999/2000).

Today's children, compared to those in previous generations, have experienced the highest level of sexualisation. They have been presented from babyhood onwards with sexual images from a variety of sources. These include elements of the media such as movies, TV, billboards and a variety of magazines. As well, everyday language is replete with sexual expletives and references, as is much modern clothing and personal image. Many parents and educators are aware of this increased, overt and covert sexualisation and address sexuality education for young people using relevant and appropriate approaches (Goldman, 2000).

A DEFINITION OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Haffner (1990:2), the past President of the Sex Information and Education Council of the US (SIECUS), defines sexuality education as:

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... a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships, and intimacy. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. Sexuality education addresses the biological, sociocultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions of sexuality from 1) the cognitive domain, 2) the affective domain, and 3) the behavioural domain, including the skills to communicate effectively and make responsible decisions.

That is, sexuality education is conceptualised as broad, relevant, multi-faceted, contexualised and relevant across the lifecycle. Sexuality programs that focus on information only are inadequate as they do not assist to develop healthy attitudes or the necessary skills to act upon that information (Gourlay, 1996). McCann (1999:24) concurs and suggests that sexuality programs should deal with broader issues of 'sexuality, self-acceptance, body image, peer relationships, parent-child communication, sexual orientation, and the myriad of social and emotional issues'. Therefore, in order to be holistic, sexuality education needs to encompass physical, biological, psychological, socio-cultural, economic, ethical and moral dimensions.

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There will always be a need for sexuality education. To date, sexuality education for children has essentially been formal through school lessons, textbooks, or family, or informally through peer information which is frequently inaccurate or serendipitous (Goldman & Goldman, 1981a; 1981b). Levitan (2000:92) notes that:

Few school systems have ever truly implemented comprehensive health education for grades K-12, where students not only get information but also have the opportunity to examine how their belief systems impact their behaviour. And what has been labelled sexuality education has too often been heavily skewed toward the safe topics of anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system, pregnancy and childbirth, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Gourlay (1996) says that he personally had only had approximately five hours of formal sexuality education over his thirteen years at school in Australia.

GOALS OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION

According to SIECUS (1999:29), a comprehensive sexuality education program for young people should have four main goals:

- to provide accurate information about human sexuality;

- to provide an opportunity to develop and understand one's values, attitudes, and beliefs about sexuality;

- to help develop relationships and interpersonal skills; and

- to help exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships, including addressing abstinence, pressures to become prematurely involved in sexual intercourse, and the use of contraception and other sexual health measures.

All of these would constitute an appropriate basis for on-going sexuality education for pre-schoolers, children and, later, teenagers.

Sexuality education programs should be appropriate to the individual's developmental level and should include analysis of issues such as communication, decision-making skills, friendships, family relationships and self-esteem (SIECUS, 1999:29; see also Amin, 2000; Goldman & Goldman, 1981a; 1981b). Historically, there has been an increase in sexual encounters at a younger age ever since the 1960s, and it appears that every cohort is persuaded to exhibit their sexuality in more overt ways than ever before. Self-managed sexual knowledge and behaviour is very important for life-long health and supports the concept of sexual citizenship (West, 1999), that is, the sexually responsible citizen having sexually responsible behaviour.

So the question is, how early should sexuality education begin? Many parents and sexuality educators, who are cognisant of the negative consequences for young people of sexual ignorance, believe it is never too early to provide children with nascent sexuality education. In fact Goldman and Goldman (1982), in their ground-breaking research on children's sexual cognition in the USA, Canada, UK, Sweden and Australia, found that children as young as 5 years are able to grasp basic sexuality facts about themselves, the other sex (a more appropriate term than opposite sex), relationships and roles, having babies, not having babies or contraception, and an appropriate accompanying vocabulary to aid their sexual conceptualisation.

Further, developmentally, it has been found that puberty has been occurring earlier in the western world from the 19th century at about age 17 years (see Tanner, 1978). Today, the average age of reaching puberty for girls is about 12.3 years and for boys about 13.3 years (Goldman & Goldman, 1982) which means that some will reach it sooner. For example, endocrinologists have observed 8-year-old girls exhibiting

signs of puberty (see The Associated Press, 2001) where it has been suggested that younger puberty is becoming the norm.

One of the attendant difficulties for children with precocious puberty, especially girls, is that their physical appearance may be disjunctive from their mental, emotional and knowledge development. Durham (1998:389) addressed sexual precocity as 'tensions that centre around sexual decision-making versus sexual signification via costuming, cosmetics and body image'; and that the representation of sexuality 'parallels socio-cultural norms of contradiction and antilogy in the characteristics of girls' desire'. Hence, there is an exigent need for not just these girls, but also for all children to have an informed understanding of their bodies and their developing sexuality.

CHANGING EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

In the current era, change is endemic. Educational theory and practice are changing. So too are schools. This has been directly attributable to the commodification of education as a saleable substance, the evolution of new economies and workplaces, the changing and blurring of school/home/work relationships, the fashionability of home-based education, world-wide learning, and the multifunctional residence (Gibbons, Lomoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow, 1994). Greater educational flexibility means curricula are becoming more personalised, technology-based (see West, 2000), and focused towards individual learning at students' own pace and according to personal interests.

One of the main changes in education is the realisation that children's learning can take place at any time of the day or night rather than in predetermined school periods, thus heralding the demise of timetabled learning. Education will become increasingly more individualised, self-determined, self-focused, and self-directed.

> Information is no longer power, it's interpretation of information that is important (Sorrell, 2000).

This means that finding, accessing, and placing information will be power (eg, placing web site at top of search engines). It is the operationalisation of information that has become important, not the 'searching and gathering'.

Individual learning with multimedia such as CDs, videos, DVDs, computers and film is seen by UNESCO as one of the most important learning tools of the future (see Goldman & Hocking, 1999; 2000). The number of homes with computers is growing every year, and nearly all schools in Australia have some computers for students.

Internet schools are burgeoning; for example:

- http://www.worldschool.com – accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week at a cost of $1 per minute, prepaid.

- http://www.e-cademy.net – has unlimited access.

- http://www.xsiq.com – 24 hours a day, seven days a week online CD ROM tutorial developed for years 11 and 12.

- http://www.tutornet.com – 24 hours a day, seven days a week online Maths and Science real time tutoring.

The Internet has the ability to disseminate information to larger populations rather than 'reach the five kids who sat at the front of the class' (Maclean's, 2000). Such education now encourages study groups, family learning nodes (West, 2000), neighbourhood nodes, peer nodes, with individuals and friends learning on or from the Net. This is resulting in many primary schools re-conceptualising their mission and purpose to accommodate such technological changes. The Australian Capital Territory has been equipping all schools in its bailiwick with computers. Many pre-schools in Australia include computer skills for their children, and many games and activities for pre-schoolers are electronic and technology-based, including, for example, the use of digital cameras with editing capabilities, and access to multimedia lessons for many curricula areas such as Maths, English and Social Studies.

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With the information age continuing to produce linkages between sexuality and technology, it is no surprise that the Internet is fast becoming the preferred mode of communication for many people, including children.

> At this moment, the Net is in the process of becoming the most comprehensive storage and delivery system of sexually oriented and status-quo-challenging material in the history of the world. It operates 24 hours per day, has an infinitely expandable capacity, does not exist in a physical location, and, unlike X-rated theaters or art museums, has the complete participation and political endorsement of American business. And here's the best part: nobody controls it (Klein, 2000:9).

Since sex is an effective marketing tool, there is already a plethora of sexual information on the Internet. Company sites already entice surfers to their web pages and therefore their products. The Internet is a vehicle that appeals to the consumer directly. 'Sex' has been the top search word on the Net (Pringle, 2000).

> In light of postmodern communications technology, every belief about what is true and important is challenged radically and continuously by the rapid pace of social transformation.

Therefore, the most important truths that older generations have to offer younger generations are guidelines for how to find their own way in an evolving world of increasing complexity – characterized by a considerable amount of uncertainty and chaos (Maddock, 1997:17).

THE INTERNET AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

There is a plethora of web sites covering sexuality ranging from valuable, informative sexuality education (see Roffman, Shannon & Dwyer, 1997; Schnarch, 1997) to erotica to pornography. The sites of two of the most respected organisations concerned with sexuality education include the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US (SIECUS) (www.siecus.org/) and the Alan Guttmacher Institute (www.agi-usa.org/). Both of these sites provide quality sexuality information for people of all ages.

Sexuality education, however, may be made unattainable for some children because of the blocking devices of some Internet censorship programs. One such program, Cyber Patrol, has a Cyber NOT category of 'sexual education'. This results in sites involving HIV/AIDS education being excluded (Portelli & Meade, 1998). Klein (2000:9) believes that censorship of sex on the Net will still be one of our biggest stumbling blocks in the future. Even though the Net is inherently immunised against censorship, it will still come under constant attack.

Some guidelines for parents to protect children online are provided by ECPAT Australia (2000). These are:

- Tell children never to give out personal information such as surname, address, telephone number;

- Remind children that people are not always who they say they are online;

- Supervise your child's use of the Internet and become computer literate;

- Organisations or schools should never post photos of children with any identifying information on the Internet;

- Tell your child never to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they have met on the Internet;

- Ask you child to immediately exit any chatroom or shut down from any site that has suggestive, obscene or harassing messages and to report the site to a teacher or parent. Tell them never to respond to such messages; Use blocking software such as Net Nanny and Cyber Patrol that will filter out sites.

For further information on Internet safety issues, see www.netalert.net.au.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION FOR MODERN PRE-SCHOOLERS (AGED 0-5 YEARS)

During the first few years of life, children gradually learn to differentiate themselves from what is not themselves (by around 12 months), to recognise themselves in a mirror (15 months), to display self-consciousness (18 months), and to develop a sense of their own gender identity (2 years) (Berger, 1998). During the second year of life they assertively display their own will. According to the psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson (1963), healthy toddlers thereby develop a sense of their own autonomy, rather than a basic sense of shame and doubt. By the third year, there is evidence of possessiveness including a belief in 'my body', and by the fourth year most children prefer gender-typed toys and games. During these first five years, therefore, children have diverse information needs, including the need to learn about their body and how it functions, and to learn about the similarities and differences between the sexes (see Goldman & Bradley, 2001).

The life of the modern pre-schooler is packed with stimuli of all sorts. Most toddlers are familiar with television, media, videos, CD-Roms, discs, ZIP drives, films, plays, concerts, and the enormous variety of visuals including sexual images. The current cohort of pre-schoolers experience greater intellectual stimulation than ever before in history. Competitive education has led to parents wanting their children to have an 'edge', resulting in earlier educational stimulation even from babyhood to enhance their social and intellectual development. These factors are a response to the characteristics of a competitive society and modernity. Thus, toddlers are surrounded by increased levels of visual, tactile, taste, olfactory and auditory (verbal and musical) stimulation

Table 1 Internet sexuality information accessible by children aged 0-5 years

Group sexuality definition	Information needs	Examples of appropriate Internet sites
Formation of articulation of self and others	Bodies – both male and female	Mothers and fathers need to have basic technological literacy to access sexuality education with pre-schoolers www.tampax.com/
Awareness of different sexes	Body parts and vocabulary	Visual identification information of male and female body forms and differences 'Ask Jeeves for Kids' www.ajkids.com/
Discovers genital stimulation and pleasure	Normality of human body and its characteristics	Children's rights information and opinion board www.unicef.org/voy/meeting/rig/righome.html
Some risk of sexual abuse	Initial sexual safety strategies	Information on sexual abuse www.childabuse.org/

Web sites accessed February 2003

and enjoy an increased vocabulary, most likely because of television and increased parental education level. Many toddlers experience a wide variety of activities and play including an extensive choice of games, toys, puzzles, jokes, tricks, entertainment, films, magazines and books, as well as access to a wide variety of foods and, in some cases, overseas travel.

Many toys for pre-schoolers are creative and assume a degree of technological literacy, including turn switch on, boot up, go to your chosen field, move cursor, use mouse or joy stick repeatedly, shut down and turn machine off. There are also an increasing number of computer-learning activities for a wide range of curriculum areas, which are accessible by children. Many five-year-olds are computer-comfortable and competent in accessing the Web and finding addresses. However, the level of parental technological literacy is important for helping pre-schoolers and children at home.

Table 1 presents a selection of Web sites appropriate for pre-schoolers aligned with their cohort sexuality characteristics, their information needs based on the literature of children of this age (Goldman & Goldman, 1981a; 1981b) and the appropriate cognitive levels (Goldman & Goldman, 1982). It is recognised that site content can change overnight and not always result in enhanced quality of information.

The characteristics of the sites presented here include being child-friendly, entertaining and fun, vocabulary-appropriate, interactive, question-based, keyword-searchable, pedagogically varied, maintaining children's interest, textually-minimised and graphically-oriented. Of course, the quality of the information and concepts understood by pre-schoolers will depend on a range of his/her personal characteristics such as prior learning, level of literacy

including vocabulary, and also parental assistance. Parents are able to work through sites with their child, thus enhancing the child's learning.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION FOR MODERN CHILDREN (AGED 6-10 YEARS)

These children have greater accessibility to computers and technology than any generation previously. Most of them are comfortable with computers and feel competent in accessing information of different kinds including the Internet. Many are able to design interactive multimedia modules (Goldman & Krause, 2001; 2002) using programs such as Hyperstack, Powerpoint, and Authorware. In such a comfort zone, children find it easy and beneficial to enhance their knowledge using computers. It will not be surprising if this generation of young people becomes self-sex-educators in response to their lack of understanding on a personal basis, relying on the quality information they can readily access on computer, rather than on poorer quality 'programs' from elsewhere.

Despite the early writings of Freud, we now know that sexuality is not suppressed during the childhood years. Rather, it is frequently expressed in indirect ways – in play, in private, and in fantasy. The hormonal changes that trigger puberty are first in evidence not during adolescence, but at ages 7-10 years (Berger, 1998). By this time, children are literate and capable of thinking logically. They are curious about sexuality, and have needs for information relating not only to body functions and the physical dimension of sexuality, but also relating to issues such as puberty, periods, masturbation, wet dreams, and sexual rights and abuse (see Goldman & Bradley, 2001).

Table 2 provides a selection of sites appropriate for modern children. The characteristics of the sites presented here

Table 2 Internet sexuality information accessible by children aged 6-10 years

Group sexuality definition	Information needs	Examples of appropriate Internet sites
Refining articulation of self and others	Bodies – both male and female	Visual biological information, eg, how body works and life cycle 'Ask Jeeves for Kids' www.ajkids.com/
Recognition of different sexes	Body parts and vocabulary	Kids Health For Kids. Feelings, my body, growing up, kids talk, help, games, problems, vocabulary www.kidshealth.org/kid/
Sexual curiosity initiated	Function of body parts	Ask the Experts: Sex and Relationships [email questions, articles and discussions] www.netdoctor.co.uk/sex_relationships/
Pre-pubertal acceleration	Early puberty information, periods and wet dreams	Puberty information www.bodymatters.com/parents/puberty.html
At risk of sexual abuse	Sexual safety information and strategies	Keeping safe from sexual abuse www.medem.com/
Children's rights	Children's rights	Children's rights information www.unicef.org/voy/meeting/rig/righome/html
Personal crisis problems	Self management, problem management	Crisis intervention www.onkaparingacity.com/services/
Increased risk of sexual abuse	Child sexual abuse	Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network www.rainn.org

Web sites accessed February 2003

include being interactive, interactor-friendly, vocabulary-appropriate, question-based, keyword-searchable, pedagogically varied, maintaining children's interest, textually minimised and graphically oriented and enhanced. Children at this cognitive development level are able to grasp concrete concepts and for some children, abstract concepts. Greater depth and breadth of conceptual understanding of their bodies and sexuality is evident at these age levels (see Goldman & Goldman, 1982).

OTHER FUTURE SOURCES OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION

While the Internet is currently seen as the primary information source of the 21st century for everything as well as sexuality, other future sources of sexuality education are increasingly being accessed. In the information age, children will continue to access traditional sources including television, magazines, schools, parents, print media, the Arts (through theatre, songs, plays, art), medical doctors, and churches. Further, some educational sources, such as some Churches, are currently reconceptualising themselves in accord with current and future attitudes. Many of their sexual programs are more didactic, less interactive, and will compete with the quality of information available on the Internet.

> *Sexuality education for children in the information age will be personal, technology-derived, instantaneous, accessible any time and any place, not controlled by social or educational structures, and individualised.*

CONCLUSION

With increasing access to the Internet by children, more sexuality education sites will be visited thus resulting in enhanced current sites, and no doubt an increasing number of new sites being added. A greater openness and access to Internet sexuality information may contribute to the breaking down of hegemonic sexual knowledge, may undermine the barriers of accessibility to sexual knowledge, and may remove cultural sexual inhibitions through enhanced personal sexual knowledge.

Some of the implications of enhanced computer accessibility for children may well be a tendency towards self-doctoring. Virtual reality sites will become customised to personal preferences (see Silverman, 1993). There will be less direct interpersonal contact, but more textual and ostensibly delayed communication. It is well known that typed text

may contain unintended multiple meanings compared to interpersonal relationships where personal reading occurs of intonation, nuance and body language to decipher accuracy of relay (see Bernstein, 1977). In a number of western societies including North America and Australia, there appears to be a growing disjuncture between the values of adults and children. The current move towards censorship of computer accessibility by parents, educators and governments (see Portelli & Meade, 1998; Pateman, Grunbaum & Kann, 1999) has attempted to arrest this disjuncture. Klein (2000) believes that censorship of sexuality on the Net will still be one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the future. Even though the Net is inherently immunised against censorship, it will still come under constant attack.

Sexuality education for children in the information age will be personal, technology-derived, instantaneous, accessible any time and any place, not controlled by social or educational structures, and individualised. There is the inevitability of increased usage of Personal Information Assistants (PIAs) at all ages, and there will be increasing amounts of self-sex education.

> To a much greater degree than before, individuals must now make choices and use these new opportunities and freedoms in socially responsible and healthy ways. With less well defined social scripts, people will have to write their own. This is liberating for many while overwhelming and confusing for others (Coleman, 1999/2000:np).

For children, the advantages of web sexuality education are that it is private, minimises embarrassment and can be accessed in their own time when required. That is, it is person-specific. It can provide access to further sites for additional information and can be bookmarked for re-visiting later. Some sites have personalised questions and responses, and thus provide customised sexuality information

The growth of children's sexual understanding will enhance their personal development, self-esteem, maturity, and personal decision-making skills. They will benefit by becoming more knowledgeable, more aware, more self-confident about themselves and their enhanced social relationships, and develop greater personal self-management. Finally, overall, accessibility to web sexuality education for children in the information age will enhance their lifelong learning in helping to develop well-adjusted children into well-rounded teenagers, and well-rounded teenagers into well-adjusted adults. Such personal enhancements will benefit individuals and societies at large, thus enhancing their social capital (see Drielsma, 2000) resulting in improved quality of life for everyone. ☐

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