

## Teaching teens about sexual pleasure.

by Joe Fay

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Teaching teens about sexual pleasure remains a controversial issue. Yet there is a critical need to make a case for the relationship between sexual pleasure and sexual health, to suggest how educators can address the subject in the classroom, and to exhort them to overcome their reticence and give this subject the attention it deserves.

We sexuality educators need to broaden our perspectives to include sexual pleasure as part of the larger issue of body awareness. With this change, we can more easily recognize how our culture's neglect of sexual pleasure is but one part, albeit a very important part, of our general alienation from the body that gets to the very heart of the question: "What does it mean to be fully human?"

### CULTURAL DISEMBODIMENT

In a way that we too often take for granted, our "sensuality" defines our place in the cosmos as biological beings. As author Diane Ackerman states in her eloquent book, *A Natural History of the Senses*: "To begin to understand the gorgeous fever that is consciousness, we must try to understand the senses--how they evolved, how they can be extended, what their limits are, to which ones we have attached taboos, and what they can teach us about the ravishing world we are privileged to inhabit." (1)

For two million years of human evolution, children have learned by directly interacting with their natural environment. At every step along the way, their family of caring adults has taught them the customs and survival skills of their tribe. (2) During that time, many societies were "embodied" in the natural world, with all of its joys and terrors. People may debate whether life was either "nasty, brutish, and short," (3) or leisurely and idyllic. (4) But there is no debate that humans lived and evolved in a sensual world. Their very survival depended on their connection to their senses. The experience of bodily pleasure and pain was a vibrant part of life because that was how they learned.

They also bonded to their loved ones through their senses, especially the sense of touch. From infancy onward, humans established and expressed their deepest connections through hugging, holding, touching, and caressing. Countless studies have demonstrated that this physical contact is essential for parent-child bonding. From Harry Harlow's famous monkey experiments (5) to current brain research, we have learned that touch deprivation

leads to attachment problems. (6)

In what deserves to be a landmark book, *A General Theory of Love*, writers Lewis, Amini, and Lannon review recent research on the physiology of the limbic system, the part of the brain that developed as mammals evolved from reptiles. These studies reveal the biological basis of parent-child bonding and the critical role that parental proximity and touching play in establishing patterns of emotional learning. (7) Through "limbic resonance, regulation, and revision," our brains establish our capacity for attachment and intimacy (8) Because we are mammals, love is, at its biological core, a physical act. It is sensual.

Unfortunately, today's technological society can wreak havoc with a child's need for attachment. Far-reaching ramifications include the inability to form healthy, intimate relationships; the start of physical and emotional problems; and the search for substitute meanings through addictive behavior. (9)

In our society, children are placed in day care programs where they are cut off from their loved ones and the natural world of their senses for many hours of the day. They attend schools where they often sit in enclosed areas without windows and with artificial light. They are rewarded for quietly sitting in their seats, even though their brains are biologically programmed to learn through direct interaction with nature.

Even worse, they often sit passively at home watching television for an average of four hours each day, (10) separated yet again from the direct experience of the world around them. Here their brains receive stimuli, in a way unprecedented in human history, from a powerful source whose purpose is not the child's well-being, but its own. In rapid bursts that shorten their attention span, (11) they absorb the corporate mantra of instant gratification and consumerism, learning that satisfaction lies outside themselves and that pleasure comes from buying things.

Against this cultural backdrop is a political climate that sees sexuality as a problem to control and exploit and that views sexual pleasure with trepidation. As sexuality educators, how should we respond? How do we make the case for sexual health? How do we address controversial issues? How do we make the connection between body alienation and deeper spiritual issues? How do we use those insights to integrate the vital issue of sexual pleasure into the framework of sexuality education?

### BODY AWARENESS

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Much of the controversy over the topic of sexual pleasure is due to our culture's narrow focus on sexuality as genital sex. In workshops that I have conducted, participants have quickly turned discussions on teaching teens about sexual pleasure to discussions on sexual behavior and such "hot button" issues as sexual intercourse.

Sexual behavior and intercourse are worthy topics, but sexuality educators really need to start discussions from the more holistic viewpoint that sexuality is more than sex and that sex is more than intercourse. As author Beverly Whipple said in her article "Helping Girls Claim Their Sexuality": "Sexuality is the totality of a person--physical, spiritual, social, emotional, cultural. We have the capability of expressing our sexuality in a variety of ways, not just with our genitals." (12)

Early education about sexual pleasure should involve teaching our children to enjoy and be comfortable with their bodies. This begins at birth and continues through early childhood largely by the way we hold and touch them and by how we nurture their growing body awareness. Are we physically present to meet their biological need for bonding? Do we provide warm hugs or are we cold and distant? Do we touch our male children as much as our female children? Do we provide them with a stimulating environment that enhances all of their senses? Do we help them to feel "at home" in their developing bodies? Do we ensure that children get the physical activity and fresh air that they need? Do we create a "sensual" world for our children?

Elementary education about body awareness can include a variety of traditional and nontraditional programs. The possibilities include physical education, recreation and dance, yoga, breathing exercises, guided imagery, meditation, and more. In all of them, we must recognize the importance of teaching children about the senses and allowing them sufficient time to explore the natural world around them. We must also help them to understand body diversity--that healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Most important, we must ensure that they have sufficient time to bond with those they love.

During adolescence, teens often feel less connected to their bodies and senses because of rapid physical changes. In addition, they become more focused on sexuality. At this time, we much teach them about the many ways they can achieve bodily pleasure, including both sexual and nonsexual alternatives to genital sex.

### FEARS OF EDUCATORS

Why don't educators discuss sexual pleasure? In conducting workshops on this topic, I have found that the

primary reason is fear. This fear includes three components reflected by these remarks:

\* "I'm afraid of saying something that will be harmful to the child."

\* "I'm afraid of saying something that will jeopardize the program."

\* "I'm afraid of saying something that will get me in trouble or even cost me my job."

These fears result in a form of censorship because many educators simply avoid the topic due to a lack of clear direction or support. This is by far the most subtle and pervasive form of censorship in sexuality education programs. It is not imposed by an outside authority but occurs inside the minds of the educators themselves. Teens are prevented from learning from each other because classroom discussion is stifled.

Our society's sexism reflects what is censored. Information about female sexual pleasure is withheld more often than male sexual pleasure. My personal experience as a sexuality educator has found that teen girls routinely complete sexuality education courses without learning about the clitoris. Even fewer know that vaginal lubrication is a sign of sexual arousal.

Few people will argue that 12-year-old boys shouldn't know about their penises. Yet the same people consider 12-year-old girls too young to know about their clitorises. Similarly, boys are expected to talk freely and joke about their erections while girls are not supposed to mention vaginal lubrication. Finally, people seldom have a problem with male orgasms during adolescence, as there is a general recognition that most boys will have orgasms as a result of wet dreams, masturbation, or sexual activities with a partner. Yet people reveal an ambivalence and uncertainty about the appropriateness of teen girls having orgasms.

Educators are unclear about where to "draw the line" on what to tell teens about sexual pleasure. Even when they believe that information is appropriate, they fear that students will do something they wouldn't otherwise do or that educators would be seen as condoning destructive or immoral behavior if they said too much.

Beneath these fears is the belief that sexual pleasure can get out of control and that feelings are dangerous because they may lead to risky behavior. Of course, uncontrolled sexual passion, when acted out, can at its worst have life-threatening results. But we must learn to make a critical distinction between feelings and behavior. Sexual

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thoughts and feelings are not harmful. Sexual behavior is what we must worry about.

The question, therefore, is this: "Under what circumstances is self control more likely to be present--when sexual desire is acknowledged or when it is repressed?"

### TEEN SEXUAL DESIRE

Although we have little data to guide us, educators believe that a fairly large number of sexually active teens are having intercourse for reasons that have very little to do with pleasure, desire, or intimacy.

Author Sharon Thompson's research in *Going All the Way* revealed that many girls had intercourse to obtain a commitment and love from their partner. What they usually got instead was heartbreak or pregnancy. (13) Thompson also found that many girls had sexual intercourse with little forethought. "They had never been introduced to the notion of desire--their own or their partner's--and so could not anticipate it. When they found themselves in situations where those elements were introduced, they froze; it was like they were in a trance. Certainly, they weren't making an active decision to have sex." (14)

As educators, we need to explore questions like: "What does it take to make a good sexual decision?" Some answers are accepted across the spectrum, such as factual information, a value system, good communication, high self-esteem, and future plans.

We do not, however, agree on the crucial issue of sexual pleasure. So we need to explore these questions: "Should we teach teens to acknowledge and even enjoy their sexual feelings or to suppress, ignore, and deny them?" "Which approach leads to good sexual decisions?" "Which approach is sexually healthy?"

We must first overcome the idea that sexual feelings are wrong and that we must avoid them. Instead of viewing feelings as an enemy, we should treat feelings as a guide. Feelings, according to James Nelson, are the "wholeness of human response to the realities experienced by the person.... The feeling response to reality involves both cognition and emotion. It is the willingness to respond with as much of the totality of the self as one is able. It is the openness to both spontaneity and discipline. It is the capacity to be deeply aroused by what we are experiencing. (15)

In short, being in touch with sexual feelings will enhance an individual's sexual decision-making and lead to greater self-control. "Self-control implies self possession, the

attribute of those persons in touch with their feelings and in command of their movements," said Nelson. (16)

A key conclusion of Thompson's study was that awareness is linked to responsible sexual behavior. Learning about sexual desire and arousal--the triggers, the bodily signs, the feelings--empowered the girls to make their own decisions rather than being passively swept away. Recognizing their desires fueled their independence. Those girls who accepted their sexuality and freely acknowledged their sexual desires were more sexually responsible. In general, the more a teenage girl "anticipated and understood pleasure, balanced the desire for love with an array of other concerns and relationships or accepted love as ephemeral, the more likely she was to be realistic, even humorous, about romance. With realism and humor came recognition of the necessity of protection and contraception...." (17)

In the words of author Christine Schoefer: "Feeling desire is an essential component of self-knowledge and a prerequisite for establishing boundaries. If a girl doesn't know what her 'yes' means, how could her 'no' come from the heart?" (18) Sexual desire actually provides an opportunity for self-knowledge. Being able to acknowledge and enjoy sexual feelings is a component of sexual health.

There was already a convincing body of evidence a decade ago that supported Thompson's findings by demonstrating the relationship between sexual attitudes and responsible sexual behavior. Researcher William Fisher found that teens with generally sex-positive emotions were more likely to admit to themselves that they were sexually active and take all of the steps necessary to protect themselves, including communication with their partner and the acquisition and consistent use of contraception. Conversely, he found that sex negative emotions "interfere [d] with the performance of each pregnancy and STD/HIV preventive behavior studied." (19)

Most educators would agree that humans make their best sexual decisions in full awareness of all of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. However, few programs help young people learn techniques to pay attention to their bodies in general let alone when they are sexually aroused. It is as if there is a vast conspiracy of silence designed to make people think that sexual arousal isn't happening. The result is that large numbers of teens--boys as well as girls--engage in sexual intercourse, receive very little pleasure or intimacy, and expose themselves to considerable danger.

### A NEW PARADIGM

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way We need look no

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further than our European allies to see that sexual pleasure is considered a healthy part of an intimate relationship. (20)

While America's mixed messages have produced what writer Lara Riscoll has called "sexual schizophrenia," (21) Europeans have seamlessly integrated sexual pleasure into their sexual health messages. "In general, their campaigns encourage specific sexually healthy behaviors and do not express fear or shame. They show people in pleasurable relationships. The messages are generally engaging and appealing. They present images and concepts that relate to sexuality in a sensual, amusing, or attractive way." (22)

There is a fundamental difference between the United States and Europe in how teen sexual behavior is defined. Europeans see it as a developmental and public health issue. They consider sexual exploration a healthy part of growing up. "Teen sexual behavior in the United States is viewed in many contexts: a moral failing, a political issue, a private family matter, a public health concern, but seldom as a developmental matter," said Linda Berne and Barbara Huberman in the Advocates for Youth publication *European Approaches to Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Responsibility*. (23)

This lack of clarity permeates American sexuality education on every level. The raising of simple questions during teacher training often leads to long and unresolved debates. A few examples:

- \* How do you define abstinence?
- \* What does it mean to be sexually active?
- \* Does oral sex count as sex?
- \* Is there such a thing as safe sex?

Unless educators have already explored their own feelings and values about teens and sexual pleasure before they are confronted with difficult questions from teens, they will likely avoid the issue of pleasure entirely and revert to answers that only deal with the risks and dangers of the particular activities in question. (See "Questions to Help Sexuality Educators Explore Their Values," below.)

When we place the topic of sexual pleasure within the paradigm of healthy sexual development, the above questions become easier to answer. Teens have a right to sexual information. Sexual activity is a healthy part of adolescent development. It is healthy for teens to feel good about their bodies and to derive pleasure from them. It is normal for teens to want to engage in intimate

relationships.

### LOVE AND PLEASURE

Love is the most important topic in sexuality education, yet it is one of the most neglected. Our neglect is a reflection of our cultural values and our uncertainty about what to say. Our silence on the subject of love creates a vacuum that is filled by popular culture.

Many teens learn about sex and love primarily from television and movies. What they learn is that after people are attracted to each other, they fall in love and are swept away in the heat of passion where words and protection are unnecessary. They learn that sex is somehow more romantic or less wrong if it "just happens." They learn that genital intercourse is the natural and inevitable outcome of sexual passion and that it happens at the next available opportunity after falling in love. Most disturbingly, by portraying spontaneous, unplanned genital intercourse as the ultimate pleasure, these programs model a behavior that puts teens at increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases or unplanned pregnancies.

It is a mistake to leave love's definition to the marketplace and the media, where every serious issue is turned into a commodity. Popular culture equates sex with love. It also leaves young people with the impression that romantic love is the ultimate form of love. This superficial treatment reduces our potential to develop healthy, mature, intimate relationships.

Educators cannot do a thorough job with the subject of adolescent love unless we are willing to address the powerful physical feelings that are a natural part of the process. Of course, love is much more than physical feelings, and we need to do everything we can to ensure that teens understand the many types of love, especially the difference between love and sexual attraction. But we cannot make these important distinctions unless we accept sexual pleasure as a legitimate topic of discussion.

### SAFETY AND PLEASURE

If teens learn not only about alternatives to sexual intercourse but also about being mindful, focused, and aware during all forms of sexual activity they will find their sexual relations safer and more enjoyable. They will have no need to rush to intercourse. We need to teach them that the skin is the largest sexual organ and that the brain is the most important.

There are many effective teaching strategies that can teach teens about alternatives to intercourse. (24) The "Sexual Behavior Continuum," where sexual activities

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follow one another sequentially from touching to intercourse with increasing levels of physical intimacy is another effective strategy. My own version of this activity includes asking teens to name specific sexual behaviors, using their own terminology, and having them reach consensus on where those behaviors belong on the continuum. They then physically place themselves along the continuum based on how far they think it is healthy for a hypothetical 16 year old to go. Discussion follows on why they made their selection and on the importance of always knowing one's limits and communicating those limits to a partner. (I will mail a free copy of my own version of this activity to anyone who requests it.)

In Deborah Roffman's book, *Sex and Sensibility*, she asks partners to consider four questions as they move along the continuum:

\* Integrity: "Do I think that this kind of intimacy with this person at this time is morally right or wrong?"

\* Safety: "What are the physical risks and are we adequately protected?"

\* Maturity: "Am I emotionally, intellectually, and socially ready for this experience?"

\* Mutuality: "What are the needs, desires, and expectations of the other person involved, and how do they relate to mine?" (25)

Beyond specific strategies such as the ones mentioned here, teaching about sexual pleasure works best when the educator has a mind-set that is open to the discussion of relevant subjects. Do we integrate information about sexual pleasure into puberty education when we talk about body parts and their functions, erections, ejaculations, orgasms, wet dreams, and vaginal lubrication? Do we discuss the sexual response cycle? Do we include information about sexual feelings when we respond to teens' questions?

### BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT

Adolescence is a time when we begin our lifelong search for meaning. Recent advances in brain research have discovered that the prefrontal cortex, the most evolutionarily advanced area of the brain, is still in the process of developing from approximately the age of 16 through 20. This is the main area of the brain that governs impulse control, decision-making, and consideration of consequences. (26)

Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of numerous books on the nature of human consciousness, argues in *Evolution's End*

that the adolescent brain is genetically programmed to make the leap to a higher level of consciousness that integrates the three levels of the brain, placing the higher centers in charge and ultimately allowing humanity to reach its full intellectual and spiritual potential. (27)

Unfortunately, the American culture subverts this process, keeping most people on a level of self-centeredness where they fail to perceive the connections that unite us all. As a result, we fall victim to what the philosopher Alan Watts called modern man's greatest and most destructive illusion--that we are separate, unconnected individuals. (28)

Pearce says that the adolescent, although unable to articulate the loss of something he never knew, still feels a nebulous but palpable yearning, what novelists have referred to as the "grape bursting in the throat;" (29) or simply "joy." (30) When more fully realized, this 'joy' far surpasses our common understanding of pleasure or happiness. It is a state of transcendence that replaces our ego-centered awareness with a consciousness of the unity of all creation.

If the teen never learns a way to explore the source of this deep meaning, he begins the search for alternate satisfactions and substitute meanings, which all become part of the addictive process, keeping him separate, unconnected, and unfulfilled. Our disembodied culture is replete with addictive diversions and banal amusements to keep us out of touch with our real feelings. Addictions, in fact, become a way of avoiding the pain. Even sex can be used in this way.

The paradox of being human is that we are both animal and spiritual. Two decades of brain research have demonstrated the relationship of feelings to the health of the body. (31) More recent research clearly indicates that our human needs for love and intimacy are essential to our well-being. (32) To be fully human is to integrate the body, mind, and spirit--and to be aware.

### CONCLUSION

We sexuality educators have a role to play in developing a vision of sexual health that empowers all people to reach their full human potential. In the words of writer Scott Peck: "Let us prepare ourselves. Let us do so by relearning how important we are, how beautiful we are and how we are desired beyond our wildest imaginings. And let us, as best we can, go out into the world to teach others how important they are, how beautiful they are and how they too are desired beyond their wildest imaginings." (33)

We have long misunderstood, exploited, and reduced the

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concept of pleasure to mere hedonism. When we treat it as a sacred gift rather than as a frivolous pursuit, we will begin to recognize its central place in humanity's potential.

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### RELATED ARTICLE: QUESTIONS TO HELP SEXUALITY EDUCATORS EXPLORE THEIR VALUES

Fay uses these questions during teacher training sessions to help educators explore their values on these issues:

- \* In the context of a teen relationship, is sexual pleasure good or bad?
- \* Is it healthy for teens to have safe sexual experiences?
- \* Is it healthy for teenage girls to have orgasms?
- \* Should educators teach teens how to make safer sex more enjoyable?
- \* Should educators teach teens how to receive as much pleasure as possible during a sexual act?
- \* Should teens receive explicit instructions on how to pleasure their partner?
- \* Should teens learn masturbation techniques?
- \* Should educators teach lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender teens about issues related to their own sexual pleasure?
- \* Is it okay for teens to have intercourse as long as they protect themselves?
- \* Should educators adopt the European maxim "safe sex or no sex"?