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“What do bras have to do with puberty?”

Jamie P. Ross

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Teaching puberty to 10-11 year olds and teaching sexuality to 13-18 year olds should be fun. The following questions were some that rose out of in my daughter’s 5th grade class. They are engaging and fun:

Why do I have pubic hair?

Is puberty an essential part of life?

How do you know when you are going through puberty?

How long will it take for puberty to end?

How do animals get puberty?

What is a vagina?

What do bras have to do with puberty?

What is a wet dream?

What is sex?

Will it hurt?

Is puberty bad?

What do I do if I go through puberty and I didn’t bring anything?¹

Yet fun is not ordinarily associated with teaching puberty and sex in polite secular American society, let within religious arenas. It may not be polite and there are parental fears that formal sex education has a causal relationship with promiscuity. Yet, when I have asked over the years in my Sexualities class, in my most informal of polls, whether parents have taken a large and/or productive role in teaching sex to their children, the

percentages are always very small. Many parents do not know good ways of teaching puberty let alone sexuality and yet oftentimes require permissions slips for it to be addressed in schools. In my daughter's class, some parents of the boys said that their boys were not ready. These 11 year olds are already touching themselves, and masturbating. The counselor suggested that the parent speak with their son that evening, as the children were going to talk about the submitted questions the next day. [Slide]

Perhaps some of these difficulties can be addressed with this type of student-centered question that develop into broader discussions about sexuality. However, this also entails having a counselor/facilitator who is not embarrassed as well. Again, in my informal polls, most if not all students said that was not the case. Moreover, my research has shown that *competent counselors who are not embarrassed* were on the list of top ten desires.

More often than not, boys' curiosities were satisfied later and least. Whereas, quite often, given the widespread feminist and non-feminist focus on women's bodies, young girls' curiosities seem to be addressed at earlier ages and more frequently. Boys are not left out of these early classes. The classes are often conducted together with break out sessions into same sex classes. Yet, what is predominantly focused on in these earlier classes is the maturation of the girls' bodies. My research brought out that boys are tired of only learning about girls' periods and reproduction, since sex education programs initially were designed with the presumption that sex should be linked entirely to reproduction. This long held myth has never allowed the association of sex with pleasure. (Tuana) In addition, it has only associated the possibility of pregnancy as primarily the responsibility of the female, in both feminist and non-feminist ways. (). Finally, many

of these programs play off the expectations that girls/women are the instigators and gatekeepers of boys' interests and men's' arousal. [Slide] The consequences have been devastating in the legal arena concerning rape and consent, in the everyday lives of boys and girls around bullying issues, and in men's and women's dating practices and hooking-up rituals. I would venture to say that the carrying out of these myths also contributes to abusive sexual relationships later in life that may be even more difficult to notice.

I am concerned about the construction of girls' needs and desires as well. Yet in this paper, I more directly address the prejudicial perceptions of sex generally and boys' desires. That is, when sexuality is taught from the point of view of the students and what they want to know, and not only taught from the point of view of adults and what they think students should know the relationships among boys and girls are more cooperative and empathetic. I grant that sometimes we know and sometimes we do not know whether a girl or boy submitted the questions. Since sexual exploration occurs at young ages, i.e., playing doctor at 4 years of age or hiding in the bushes and pulling down one's underwear in 1st and 2nd grade, having the vocabulary to address physical feelings is probably a good thing. The relationships among boys and girls from ages 12-18 are some of the more foundational social interactions from which a variety of sexual relationships emerges.

I propose that the more information a boy has of his body's sensations and emotions, of sexual techniques, and, of girls' sensations and emotions, the fewer abusive sexual relationships there may be. I include homosexual relationships here too as the issues of same sex affection and heterosexual relationships are conspicuously absent in

most of the current programs. [Slide] I raise this issue as some homosexual relationships, to a certain extent, can and do imitate the dynamics of less supportive heterosexual sexual relationships. Perhaps the fears of affection between and among boys may be due to the myth that these expressions also create a causal relationship, one that extends into adult homosexual relationships. This is always already in contrast to the affection/promiscuity causal relationship with girls' expressions of affection to boys which oftentimes occurs earlier and perhaps with greater frequency than boys' expressions of affection to girls. In contrast, girl's expressions of affection to other girls are thought of as natural, not constructed and not considered camouflaged and causal expressions of female homosexuality, as is the fostering of boys' expressions of affection to other boys. If some of these myths and constructed causal relationships are addressed perhaps, there will be fewer abusive sexual and emotional relationships whether they are hetero or homosexual.

Whereas many educators separate puberty education from sexuality education, I propose that we do not completely. [Slide] (I will never run for office, let alone the presidency, let it be known that I do support earlier puberty/sex education.) I am making a broad claim that entails the manner in which we teach puberty to preteens and the manner in which sexuality is taught to teens. That is to say, even as we approach topics about puberty, we need to respond to the interests and needs of the people wanting information rather than be led by the age specific guidelines of appropriate "stages" of development, emotional or physical.

Michael Reiss, a historian, made observations in 1998 that the aims of sex education in the late 1970's and early 1980's involved moral reinforcement and reproductive illumination (prevention of conceptions and births outside of marriage)

rather than the development of a repertoire of skills like decision making, communicating and negotiating². He recognizes in his work now that the gendered roles of masculinity and femininity must interdigitate with a new repertoire of skills. As we know, many feminist critiques challenge the sex education that reinforces the gender inequalities that “portray[ed] men as active sexual agents and unreliable in terms of their sexual self-control and women as sexually acted upon and responsible for managing contraception.”^{3 4} [slide] Now, in order to broaden the “performance and development of a multiplicity of masculinities”,⁵ Simon Forrest, who teaches in the Department of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, at University College London, has studied the criticisms boys have of the sex education they receive.

The complaints range from the irrelevance of birth control (other than condom use) and pregnancy to women’s sexual health and their periods. We have learned that boys are not getting what engages them concerning both their bodies, women’s bodies as well as their interests about sex. If, because of sex education classes, whether joint or single sex, “girls call boys immature”, “boys accuse girls of trying to annoy them”, and “boys’ disruptive behavior is troublesome,”⁶ we could conclude that they are not getting what they want. [slide] Moreover, what boys want is information about sexual technique and ways to satisfy their partner.

Many boys have sexual anxiety related to shame and embarrassment, but many boys also are interested in maintaining a good heterosexual reputation with male peers, and have concerns about body size, i.e., penis size. Perhaps we should respond to boys’ desires to be “considerate and responsible sexual partners.”⁷ They want information about

sex and some of their interests are different from some of the interests of some of the girls.

Forrest collected data from 500 young people aged either 13 or 14 in three co-educational schools between 1997 and 1999. I will read from his findings:⁸

“Almost all the questions about the penis and erections were asked by boys. The majority of questions were about the size of the average penis. This was supplemented by questions about whether their own penis was big enough. They also asked if it is hard to get an erection, about impotence and ejaculation. [Slide]

The second category of questions was about sexual acts. Again, almost all were asked by boys. They asked for descriptions of oral sex, masturbation and anal sex. They asked about the range and number of possible positions for heterosexual sexual intercourse. They asked about which is the most pleasurable position, for both men and women, and how gay men and lesbian women have sexual intercourse.

The third category, in which almost equal numbers of questions were asked by boys and girls, was to do with puberty. The questions were usually seeking reassurance that the individual concerned was developing at the normal rate for their age. Boys focused on the growth of pubic and body hair and girls asked about breast size and menarche.

The fourth category of questions was about conception and contraception. Here, questions from girls formed the slight majority. Equal numbers of questions were about the signs of pregnancy and whether it was possible to conceive while menstruating. Others asked about abortion and the relative effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and

the male condom. There were questions about the age at which it is legal to obtain or buy the pill or condoms.

The fifth category of questions, again found nearly as commonly from boys as girls related to the law. The majority asked for clarification about the age of consent to heterosexual sexual intercourse. Boys tended to ask why it only applied to girls and what the chances were of conviction if they had sex with a girl under the age of consent.

The sixth category of questions were almost all asked by girls and were about pressure from boys to have sexual intercourse. The penultimate group were all asked by girls and related to first heterosexual sexual intercourse. Fears about pain during sexual intercourse predominated. The final category was almost entirely from girls and was about discomfort and pain during menstruation.

Overall, the greatest number of questions was asked about sexual acts. Roughly equal numbers concerned masturbation, oral sex and other sexual acts, with fewer on sexual positions and homosexuality. There were nearly as many questions on conception and contraception; however, the range was much more limited. The third most numerous group of questions related to the penis and erections. The lowest number of questions was asked in the remaining categories and comprised about one third of the total number of questions.”

Though Forrest warns that we should be cautious about the outcomes of asking for student questions, (did everyone contribute or make more than one contribution; no differentiation was made by ethnicity, religious practices or social class) the topics of the questions are what are of interest. There was a divergence of concerns between the boys and girls. “For boys, sex is a technical feat to be mastered and a repertoire of couplings to

be discovered and tried. Girls concern themselves with repulsing unwanted sexual attention and harassment from boys and, when they engage with them, taking responsibility for the health and social consequences of intercourse.”⁹

We can see in the questions that Forrest collected that men present masculine expressions that we do not focus on. Yet, what is repeatedly focused on and portrayed in visual images of men in educational material, specifically sexual health leaflets and posters is that men are “risk takers . . . in need of women’s control.” [slide] C. Jewitt researched these images in educational material for the journal, *Sociological Research*. These images offer negative visual messages about male sexuality and an unrealistic image of female sexuality.”¹⁰ If these educational images are representing negative portrayals of boys’ desires, it also makes sense to me that boys’ stated questions specifically those accumulated by Forrest’s interviews, may be ignored. When these are the representations of men’s interests, it makes sense that the perception of those interests would be threatening and contributes to fledgling relationships. They could contribute to women’s fears and experiences of harassment and contribute to men’s sense that they are to play these roles. [Slide] Alternatively, perhaps as other researchers, such as Katie Buston and Daniel Wight find, we should “provide more explicit information about sex, how to make sex good for a girl, types of contraception other than condoms, and more on making it easier to talk to girls.”¹¹

What I suggest is that we take this research to heart when we design sex education programs, teach parents how to talk to their kids and engage in general conversation about sex in daily life. Otherwise, the awkwardly mediated, unanalyzed conversations, visual images of sexuality as well as biological explanations speak the loudest. These

sources act as “models of conventional concepts of sexuality and gender behavior. Not only do they camouflage and misinterpret men’s interests, they also deny the existence of female sexual desire,” which represent “female sexuality as a hidden, internal process defined by a woman’s reproductive capability and where the labia and clitoris are almost always excluded in both diagrams of female sexual and reproductive organs.”¹² [slide] These images provide limited and misleading information and I contend can contribute at early ages to gender harassment and sexual abuse of girls and women and misrepresentations of boys and men’s interests due to ignorance and lack of information. This conclusion seems to be in line with the researchers findings.

Evidence of this phenomenon exists even in the progressive environment of my daughter’s 5th grade class. The following are additional questions submitted by the students: “How can I stop boys from saying that I am not smart? and, Why is it that girls aren’t considered as smart as boys? Why does advertising focus on girls who have gone through puberty? Do boys have to do anything in puberty? Why do you go through puberty when you are older? Why aren’t you born with it? Does it take a certain amount of time to have sexual intercourse? As suggested, boys are in there asking these questions.

Gillian Hilton’s 2007 study included a 17 year old boy who said it was important to be taught: “How to give a woman pleasure – how not to hurt her . . .”¹³ and a 16 year old boy wanted to learn about girls’ viewpoints: “She told me about what having a period is like – it sounded horrible and made me feel really sympathetic.”¹⁴ These boys want especially “to discuss sexual techniques with a teacher who is not embarrassed to answer direct questions.” They want to talk about feelings. They feel pressured by stereotypes. “. . .

. .not to talk about what is worrying us, or what frightens us, but to laugh it off.”

Moreover, because of this pressure and lack of information the responses like the following are what can lead to varying kinds of abuse: “When I’m upset I want to hit something – the last time I had a row with my girlfriend I kicked in the toaster.”¹⁵ [slide] Our boys do not want to appear foolish if they say they are in love. They don’t want their feelings to be brushed off, that is, to be put down and told their love is just a crush. They are asking for strategies for coping. In addition, they want instant access to an individual when problems arise.¹⁶ The majority wants mixed-sex classes, more classes, and active methods of teaching, i.e., theatre education, and to be offered all this information at an earlier age. [Slide] Moreover, they want parents to be taught how to talk to kids about sex. This lack of effective communication by both teen girls and boys only leads to a variety of problems in these early and foundational relationships and those broken relationships that leave scars. Scars may heal, but require an entirely different set of skills than those I am proposing in this paper.

Susan Sanders book, *Teen Dating Violence: The Invisible Peril*, suggests that when we look at young people’s knowledge of dating practices, girls’ in particular, naïveté plays a role in the abuse they are subjected to. In addition to the lack respect men have of the women interviewed and the lack of men’s bodily control male aggressors and abusers depicted in this book in many ways connect their emotional needs with women’s emotional interests. The women engage in nuanced efforts to interpret the male behaviors as love. Love is not what the boys’ behaviors are portraying. The girls’ abilities to interpret the behavior, as such, tell us that while they want to give the men the benefit of the doubt they nevertheless, should not tolerate the behavior.

In my efforts to direct attention to giving boys what they want, I am suggesting that fundamentally what they want to is what they have asked for, that is, better ways to communicate with women and information about the variety and comfort level of sexual acts to both parties. Moreover, I am not advocating that we leave the education at the level of mechanics from people who are not embarrassed to talk about sex. I presuppose that despite my proposed efforts, some sexual behavior still may be at least inappropriate and at most abusive. In addition, I am not suggesting that women's naïveté is their fault. Sanders suggests and I agree, that since our teens are underage, the community has failed them. Sanders finds, "At a most basic level then, they know much about the mechanics of sex but little or nothing of it's meaning and consequences."¹⁷ I am advocating for mechanics and meaning.

¹ The Fifth Grade Team, "Puberty Questions – Anonymous and Straight from our Kids." Catlin Gable School. Portland, Oregon, 5/08.

² Reiss, Michael. "The history of sex education." *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol.15. Cited in Simon Forrest. "'Big and touch': boys learning about sexuality and manhood" *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Vol. 15, No. 3 2000, 250.

³ Reiss, cited in Forrest, 250.

⁴ Kimmel, Michael. "Fuel for Fantasy: The Ideological Construction of Male Lust." *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power and Transformation*. Ed. Kerwin Kay. Al Haworth Press, 2000, 250.

⁵ Reiss, cited in Forrest, 249.

⁶ Forrest, Simon. "'Big and touch': boys learning about sexuality and manhood" *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Vol. 15, No. 3 2000, 248.

⁷ Forrest, 256.

⁸ Forrest, 254.

⁹ Forrest, 255.

¹⁰ Jewitt, C. "Images of Men: Male Sexuality in Sexual Health Leaflets and Posters for Young People." *Sociological Research Online*, Vol. 2, no. 2, p.16 of 19, 6/30/07.
<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/2/6.html>

¹¹ Buston, Katie and Wight, Daniel. "The salience and utility of school sex education to young men." *Sex Education*. Vol. 6, No. 2, May 2006, 142.

¹² Jewitt, C., 5 of 19. Also see, Nancy Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance." *Hypatia* Vol. 19, no. 1 winter 2004, and See Tolman, Deborah and Tracy Higgins. "How Being a Good Girl Can Be Bad for Girls." In *Bad Girls, Good Girls: Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties*. Ed. Nan Maglin and Donna Perry. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

¹³ Hilton, Gillian L.S. "Listening to the boys again: an exploration of what boys want to learn in sex education classes and how they want to be taught." *Sex Education*. Vol. 7, No.2, May 2007, 167.

¹⁴ Hilton, 167.

¹⁵ Hilton, 168.

¹⁶ Hilton, 170.

¹⁷ Sanders, Susan. *Teen Dating Violence: The Invisible Peril*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004, 149.