

When It Comes to Sex, Keep Up the Dialogue [FINAL Edition]

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* FROM DIAPERS TO DATING: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children

By Debra W. Haffner

Newmarket Press, New York

223 pp.; \$23.95

You and your 11-year-old son are touring an exhibit of Renaissance art, and you catch him giggling at a painting of a woman with bare breasts.

You might be inclined to distract the boy by delving into a lecture about the Renaissance or, worse, yanking him away, but Debra W. Haffner would call this a "teachable moment," an opportunity to discuss the function of the breasts and why they often are revealed in paintings but covered up in real life.

Rather than sweat through the often awkward--and ineffective--"Big Sex Talk," Haffner stresses repeatedly in her valuable book the importance of capitalizing on "teachable moments" to develop a comfortable, ongoing, constructive rapport with your children about sex.

Haffner, who heads the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), writes that perceptiveness and empathy are paramount. For example, always clarify a child's question, and remember that less is often better than more. She tells the old story of a child who asked, "Where did I come from?" The father launched into clinical descriptions of ovaries and semen, and the child responded, "No, Dad. Danny says he's from Cincinnati. Where do I come from?"

Haffner's book helps parents understand that when a 15-year-old bluntly asks, "When did you first start having sex?" he is most likely seeking advice about his own budding sexuality, and she offers methods to help you steer the conversation in that direction (rather than delving into detailed descriptions of your '63 Impala escapades).

Haffner offers only a handful of rules: Never, never lie to a child; always use correct words for body parts (penis rather than wee wee); and repeat lessons when "teachable moments" arise. "After all," she writes, "we don't expect our children to remember to look both ways when they cross the street after only telling them once!"

The book, conveniently organized by age group--birth to 2 years (sexuality, she says, begins at birth), 2 to 5, 5 to 8 and 9 to 12-- gets you thinking, and she introduces each section with a box of questions, called "values exercises," which allow you to examine your stance on such topics as masturbation or a 5-year-old's crush on a neighbor. Haffner's straightforward, nearly flat prose creates a politically neutral stepping-off point for parents, and the book includes a thorough index of organizations, books, videos and Web sites on topics ranging from divorce to transsexualism.

Haffner reveals a personal bias only on the topic of birth control. Swedish teens begin intercourse at the same age as Americans but have one-sixth the pregnancy rate. One Swedish ninth grader told her that sex without contraception "would be like driving through a red light." Haffner says Americans should adopt this attitude but fails to acknowledge that some people are strongly opposed to premarital sex and birth control for religious and other reasons.

Haffner notes that some psychologists believe that by the age of 8, you've already developed an "attraction template" or "love map," a model for your ideal romantic and sexual partner that may include details of physical appearance, race and temperament.

Perhaps your current spouse has more in common with your high- school sweetheart than you care to admit.

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