

# How to be the primary educator in your children's lives

*Eighth in a series*

By ALICE HEINZEN

One of the major responsibilities of my position in the Diocese of La Crosse is to talk with parents and other concerned adults about the truth and meaning of human sexuality. A question I especially like to ask each adult audience is, "How many of you had more than one discussion with your own parents about sexuality?" In general, only one or two individuals in each group ever talked with their parents about this delicate but crucial dimension of life — a sad commentary, indeed.

Previous articles in this series have established the truth that human sexuality is a gift from God that must be protected through chastity. The conviction that parents are best suited to share this truth with their children has also been explained. How, then, do you reconcile the call of the Church to talk with your children about the gift of sexuality with a sense of reluctance you might feel, a sense of being ill-equipped to take on the role of primary educator in this area?

The Vatican document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family, offers a host of concrete actions that can easily be learned and used by parents as they take

on their role as primary educator. Topping the list of practical guidelines is the need for parents to give each child individual instruction on human sexuality. God created each child as a unique and unrepeatable person. Parents are encouraged to have one-on-one discussions with each child based on his or her physical, emotional, and spiritual uniqueness.

The second guideline asks parents to include the moral dimension in every conversation. This means that each talk with your child must be framed by God's plan for human sexuality. In other words, parents must clearly state to each child that intimate, physical expressions of love are meant exclusively for marriage.

Another important guideline for parents is to relate human sexuality to each person's vocation to love. Children need to hear their parent's conviction that human sexuality has love as its end. They need to see their parents demonstrate unselfish giving within a faithful marriage that is open to life. That way, children will understand that chastity is both possible and joyful.

The final guideline for parents is to share information about human sexuality with great delicacy, and at the right stages in each child's development. With the help of prayer, parents need to pay attention to determine each

child's readiness to hear the intimate details about human sexuality.

Children within the "years of innocence" (from approximately age five until the first signs of puberty) should learn about virtuous living and friendship skills. They should learn how to care for themselves and others; how to be kind; and how to serve others without expecting something in return. The best way to guide children in this stage is to provide many opportunities to develop friendships in and outside the home. As you guide your child, offer fair and firm discipline when selfish tendencies arise.

In this stage, parents are urged to withhold sexually explicit information that may interrupt a child's innocence. You should monitor and limit the influence of the mass media on your children as well as scrutinize what other external pressures may be present.

During the "puberty" stage (beginning with the first physical signs of adulthood), there is a great deal of information that must be taught by the parents. It is suggested that a stair-step approach be used. Begin by sharing information on the physical and emotional changes first. Once the child is comfortable with these facts, explain that these changes allow God to give each person the power to cre-

ate new life. Finally, share the intimate details on the creation of new life and firmly state that sexual expressions of love are to be reserved for marriage.

Parents should be mindful of the manner used in sharing the sensitive issues of human love and life because the tone used will determine how the message is received. The goal is to create a respectful environment where open and truthful dialogue takes place.

Many parents think that their work as primary educators ends when their child has navigated puberty. This is simply not true. Parents must continue directing and guiding each child as he or she becomes an adolescent and a young adult. While it is true that the technical information about love and life has been shared, young people still need assistance in successfully navigating the teen years. There are four very powerful behaviors that parents should follow.

1) Set clear limits, enforce those limits, and provide fair consequences. Parents who share their expectations and rationale with their children produce the happiest, healthiest, holiest young adults.

2) Stand firm and be consistent. It is simply a reality that even the best kids will buck the system! When this occurs, parents need to take a deep breath and restate the rules and conse-

quences.

3) Provide your child with the witness of a faithful and loving marriage. Youth who come from a two-parent home where the spouses are deeply committed to one another and to their family are most likely to be successful, prosperous young adults. But single parents should not become discouraged. For even though they are at a disadvantage because the example and support of the other spouse is lacking, "God sustains single parents with a special love and calls them to take on this task with the same generosity and sensitivity with which they love and care for their children in other areas of family life" (*Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, n. 38).

4) Connect your child with his or her Eternal Father. The children of parents who regularly receive the Sacraments as a family, pray publicly and privately, and follow the Ten Commandments are the most likely (always allowing for the "trump card" of free will) to grow up to be trustworthy, loving, and passionate but serene adults.

Editor's note: Alice Heinzen is the Coordinator of Natural Family Planning for the Diocese of La Crosse.

For specific information on how to be a great primary educator for your children, you may obtain "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality" (\$2.60) or "Hey Parents! Teach Them About Real Love" (\$2.00) by calling the diocesan Office of Catechesis and Evangelization at 608-791-2658 or sending an email to [alankford@dioceseoflacrosse.com](mailto:alankford@dioceseoflacrosse.com).