Beginnings Workshop

Gender Issues

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Throughout the early childhood years, children are developing their views of their unique skills, abilities, and knowledge. One part of this development is an understanding of sexuality.

This issue of Beginnings Workshop tackles the challenging topic of sexuality and gender issues by suggesting ideas and strategies for understanding sexuality from a developmental perspective, reducing bias and stereotypes, including men in the lives of children, and understanding how children come to understand their own gender roles.

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Healthy Sexuality Development in Young Children

by Kent Chrisman and Donna Couchenour

Upon arrival at preschool, Chelsea said to her teacher, "Ms. Kate, my mom says you're going to have a baby and that's why you're tummy is so big. Are you gonna have a baby?" The preschool teacher replies, "Yes, Chelsea, I'm going to have a baby." Chelsea asks, "How did the baby get in your tummy?"

Early childhood educators who work with young children and their families have many responsibilities, tasks, and issues in their daily jobs. Healthy sexuality development is one of those issues that is ignored or is only dealt with as an abrupt reaction to words or behaviors of children. This article attempts to illustrate some developmental expectations of young children and guidelines for staff and families that will help to prepare them to deal with healthy sexuality development in a more proactive manner.

Some of the basic assumptions that undergird information in this article have been previously stated in the authors' book, *Healthy Sexuality Development in Young Children: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators and Families* (2002), published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These basic assumptions are:

■ Sexuality development is part of typical human development.

■ Sexuality development in young children is different from adult or adolescent sexuality development.

■ Children learn about sexuality the same way that they learn about everything else: through words, actions, interactions, and relationships.

■ Some children have greater interest in sexual words or in physical contact (touching genitalia/masturbation) than other children.

■ Understanding healthy sexuality development is not the same as understanding child sexual abuse or neglect issues.

■ Family involvement is essential when planning for healthy sexuality development in early childhood programs.

Keeping these assumptions in mind as we examine healthy sexuality development from a variety of roles and perspectives will serve as a framework to better understand this topic. It is important to understand the many perspectives of healthy sexuality development because this issue tends to be personal, emotional, and often controversial.

Thinking about children

Young children develop as a whole; not separated into different areas of development. Part of this whole is sexuality development. Just as children have individual language, thought, and physical patterns, they also have individual sexuality patterns. Their feelings, words, and thoughts about sexuality are very different than adult or adolescent thoughts, language, and feelings. So when we observe sexual behavior or hear sexual words in young children we need to keep their developmental level in mind, as we do with all other areas of development (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional).

It is important for early childhood staff and families to understand that children's sexuality is different from adult sexuality in at least the following ways (Rothbaum, Grauer, & Rubin, 1997):

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Children treat sexuality as curiously and playfully as they treat other areas of interest. Young children are curious about their bodies, and other people's bodies in terms of both similarities and differences. Children take this interest much less seriously than do adults.

Children are spontaneous and open about their interest in bodies and reproduction. Young children have not experienced questions, comments, or behaviors that are private in nature. They will ask questions or engage in behaviors without considering suitability of time or place. For example, one five year old asked his Sunday School teacher, "What is sex?"

Children find topics of sexuality both exciting and disgusting. They are interested in adult displays of affection, but often add a "yuck" or "gross" comment as their critique.

Another useful understanding about children's sexuality development is that it is related to all of the developmental processes (Couchenour & Chrisman, 1996). Some examples for each area of development follow:

- Physical development: Children are interested in exploring all of their body parts as well as in their bodily functions. They touch their genitals because it feels good. Preschoolers are notorious for their interest in urination and defecation.
- Cognitive development: Young children are curious and want to know facts about where babies come from, even if their understanding is different from that of older children and adults. They learn accurate names for all of their body parts.
- Social development: Young children establish friendships and learn how to get along with others. They are developing a conscience as they learn right from wrong.
- Emotional development: When children feel good about themselves, they can feel good about others. They are learning appropriate ways of expressing their emotions, both positive and negative.

Thinking about teachers and staff

All of the adults who work with young children need to be child-centered, that is, continually focusing and refocusing on what is best for young children. Understanding healthy sexuality development is no different than understanding other areas of development; teachers and other staff need to think about and act on the needs of each child. What are children

saying and what are they doing? As staff listen to their questions, observe their actions, and respond in age appropriate ways, they must avoid overreacting or ignoring sensitive situations. Caring, well-trained adults act on the basis of meeting the individual child's needs.

In some cases that may mean that we quietly and calmly give matter-of-fact direction or confirmation of facts, such as "Pull your pants up and choose another center," or "Yes, that is your vulva." Sometimes it will take practice to be able to say these words without excessive emotion, hysteria, or embarrassment. It may also mean that teachers and staff will need to do some personal reflecting and thinking about their own sexuality understandings and work to separate those from their understanding of children's sexuality development. Separating adult sexuality ideas from children's sexuality development takes practice and effort.

In the interviews we conducted with teachers, we found that most early childhood educators had had training in child abuse/child neglect identification and reporting. We also found that most teachers had not had any training in sexuality development; this was true even if they had taken a child development course at any level (Couchenour, Gotshall, Chrisman, & Koons, 1997).

Thinking about families

Although family involvement is important in all areas of early childhood education practice, it is essential for the development of healthy sexuality. Early childhood educators must communicate with families through handbooks, promotional literature, policies, workshops, conferences, etc. These communications must be non-judgmental, developmentally based, and non-stereotypical. Here are some examples of such communications:

- Both girls and boys will be able to put on any clothing that is out in the dramatic play center;
- Stories will be read that include a variety of family configurations;
- Anatomically correct words, penis and vagina, will be used;
- Children who masturbate will be guided to understand; that this is personal behavior and is appropriate for private time but not group time (just as other bodily functions are not appropriate in group settings, but are private and personal).

Beginnings Workshop

Dear Families:

Children (in preschool, kindergarten, first, second, third grade) often ask questions that demonstrate their curiosity about their bodies, other people's bodies, where babies come from, and ways that boys and girls are alike and different. In our program, we will respond to children's questions honestly, but not overwhelm them with information for which they are not ready. We will communicate with families about current interests or situations that occur at school.

Children sometimes touch their genital areas or those of other children. Although these behaviors are not unusual in young children, we will remind children that touching their own genitals is private behavior and that they may not touch private parts of other children's bodies.

Our school has books, articles, web site information, and videos about healthy sexuality development in young children in the parent resource room. We encourage you to investigate these resources. Please let us know your questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
(Teacher's or director's name)

Thinking about the board and community

If you have a governing board or an advisory board, it is recommended that sexuality statements be included in handbooks, policy manuals, and other governance documents. These statements may be general but need to underscore the general principles outlined in the introduction to this article. It is important that healthy sexuality development guidelines stand apart from board guidelines for reporting child abuse and neglect and that they are embedded in our best under-

standing of children's development. Board members may need some information provided before wording for policies are adopted. This information may be provided through reading material, workshops, or child development guest speakers.

Community responses to understanding healthy sexuality will vary. Basing your staff development, policies, and programs on child-centered practices is the best response to community questions or concerns. Having board policies will also serve as the framework for answering questions from the media, prospective parents, or groups that may oppose attention to healthy sexuality development in young children (or define healthy in different ways).

Conclusion

Ignoring or overreacting to children's interest in their bodies and their curiosity about where babies come from may have a negative impact on healthy sexuality development. Although the topic of healthy sexuality is relatively new in terms of written information for early childhood programs, it is not a new topic for providers. Most early childhood educators have had frequent, if not regular situations that call for a response. Professional preparation for these occurrences is the best way to assure that we will respond to children, families, and community members in ways that promote the healthy development of each child.

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How to Create an Environment That Counteracts Stereotyping

by Alice Sterling Honig

"Stereotyping" means having fixed, unchanging ideas about the characteristics of individuals in different groups. The ideas could be about almost anything in a person's world, for example, that "boys should never play with dolls or they will become sissies," or that "girls are too delicate to climb a tree." Gender is biologically based, but gender roles are constantly constructed, and by about age 2 or 3 children's play reveals gender differences.

A year-old baby looks up at the smiling, looming face of the stranger approaching and cries mightily, because all faces different from a parent's face seem alien and frightening. The baby's brain tries to make sense of the world by pigeonholing experiences as safe or unsafe, familiar or unfamiliar. People from some cultures are taught, for example, that the right hand is to be used for eating and the left hand for toilet functions. If they see someone from a different culture group using both hands freely for eating, they may become shocked and even revolted and disparage and shun that person. People of one particular religious persuasion may "demonize" folks who have totally different beliefs as "heathens" or "pagans" and be willing even to torture and kill those who will not convert to what they consider the "true" religion.

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By stereotyping, some folks take a lazy way of knowing others rather than learning who that individual person "really" is! Persons prone to stereotype are sure that they know the characteristics of every person in a group they approve of or in a group that they are scared of or repudiate. Stereotypes shape our thoughts and expectations. Research with a baby dressed in pink and labeled a "girl" showed that adults characterized the baby as more delicate, more scared; if the baby was dressed in blue and labeled a boy, then adults used words to suggest the baby was bolder, and more interested in a toy football.

Stereotypes start early! They include ideas children have learned from families, television, and communities about what are "appropriate" and what are "expected" behaviors for persons who differ in culture, ethnicity, religion, dress, speech patterns, and gender.

Some teachers also promote stereotypes. Researchers note that teachers are more uncomfortable about preschool boys choosing to play with "girl" toys than they are with girls choosing "boy" toys. Seeing a preschooler approach the dress-up corner and take up a pocketbook with a handle, a caregiver called out, "That is for little girls, honey!" Teachers also give more attention to boy toddlers, who often express more neediness and "rowdiness" (Wittmer & Honig, 1987; Chick, Heilman, Houser, & Hunter, 2002).

Early in life, stereotyping becomes a *"convenient"* way for small children to make sense of the world. Indeed, Maccoby and colleagues suggest that the rigid sex-role stereotyping that characterizes the same-sex playgroups of preschool boys and girls arises, as young children try to understand their world and determine who and what *fits* into a cognitive category.

The four-year-old girls came to complain to Ms. Genia that the boys were hogging the block corner, and they did not have a chance to

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play with blocks. At circle time, the teacher talked with the children about taking turns and how the girls wanted a chance to build with blocks, too. The boys assured her that girls do not like blocks! When she explained that they really did want to play and had come to her to complain about not having time in the block corner, the boys seemed genuinely puzzled and surprised. Then they brightened up and decided, "OK. The girls can play with the blocks when we have outside playground time!" This solution, alas, did not resolve the girls' grievances.

Stereotyped gender role thinking about the appropriateness of certain toys is strongly visible beginning in preschool. The stereotyping of sex roles is sometimes aided by the boisterousness of boys' play as some little girls see it. "I am not inviting any boys to my five year old birthday party!" announced the child of a sociologist famous for sensitivity in cross-cultural research. "Boys play too rough!" she added. The father confided to me that he had always been so fair about beliefs, customs, and patterns of interactions of the peoples he studied. He was uncomfortable with his daughter's decision, but could not *"force"* her to invite boys. Examination of sex role differences across many studies shows that indeed boys, as a group, have higher activity and aggression levels than girls. But the rigidity of stereotyped play behaviors and name calling in some preschool environments challenges us to become more thoughtful in creating classroom atmospheres that promote more flexible thinking and interacting.

Since categorizations begin very early as a cognitive *"shorthand"* convenient way of thinking early in life, how can teachers and parents assist young children in changing their rigid concepts about groups of people, whether of different ethnicity, gender, or for example, those with special needs? In *Berenstain Bears, No Girls Allowed*, the boy cubs do not want Sister Bear around. She always beats them at baseball and other "boy" type games. The older boy cubs are upset because she boasts about being better, and they try to exclude her from their club. Should Papa Bear "force" the boy cubs to let her in their club? Although she is hopping mad, Sister Bear learns how important it is to be a good winner. This book shows a good win-win manner to resolve this problem.

Becoming aware of our own stereotypes

Becoming aware of our own adult stereotypes is a first step in understanding how strong other people's stereotypes may be. Research shows that teachers interrupt preschool girls more than boys. Teachers have been found to praise little girls far more than boys for good looks. One study showed that children at a summer camp ridiculed and rejected a fat child even more than they acted mean toward children with any other bodily condition, such as hearing loss or lack of mobility.

Some adults also unconsciously behave in more negative ways toward others who look too fat or too short. Sometimes a caregiver may be more impatient with a child dressed more ragged than other children or one who speaks with a *"funny"* drawl. Interviews in high schools reveal widespread use of cruel jibes and bullying when a peer is timid, physically weak, pimply, or *"too"* smart. Youths described their anguish, despair, and belief that teachers do not notice bullying and harassment of those ostracized as "different" (Garbarino & DeLara, 2002).

So our first line of defense to help create a classroom climate of acceptance for all the children is to think deeply about our own stereotypes and to keep our eyes open! Do we assume that a child who slurs speech or still wets his pants in preschool comes from a *"bad"* family in some way or *"must"* be a slower learner than other children? Do we give a lot more attention (although often negative!) to boys than to girls in the classroom, as many researchers show? As we increase our own awareness, we can become more attuned to unkind categorizations occurring in the classroom and can plan out helpful actions.

Some parents may simply be overwhelmed by daily tasks and not notice needs that teachers see clearly. A Head Start teacher working in a state with a warm climate told me quietly about a boy whom the children would not sit near because he *"smelled"* so bad. The rejection and isolation so saddened the little boy. A home visit revealed that mom was single and alcoholic. She did not have the strength to address this problem. The teacher bought a bar of soap for the boy and taught him how to wash and clean his clothes.

A teacher needs to be clear when a classroom problem of aversion or bullying is due to a personal difficulty or to stereotyping. It may take some sleuthing to figure out what is actually going on in the classroom. Observation is a teacher's first tool in gaining insights and information about social difficulties any children are having in the classroom. Many social interactions that are negative, for example, may be due to cultural differences or to interpersonal patterns of relating learned in the first years of life.

Work valiantly to lessen the power of stereotyped cultural beliefs and taboos

Some culture groups stigmatize women strongly. A child care director called me with a problem. A child from a culture where males dominate very strongly was attending the University preschool. He hit little girls in the preschool class whenever he wanted a toy or felt contradicted. The teachers explained firmly and kindly that little girls and boys have equal rights in the class. He could not hit a girl, despite the cultural norm he had learned earlier. When cultural stereotypes are powerful yet inimical to fairness, a teacher needs to reaffirm gently and enforce firmly the idea that all persons deserve to be treated fairly and kindly, whether the person is male or female.

The importance of attachment history

Bowlby and Ainsworth's pioneer work on Attachment Theory has resulted in dozens of studies that confirm how important secure attachment is for creating harmonious, cooperative relationships in the preschool classroom. Children who are insecurely attached to their primary caregivers in the first year of life often end up either as "bullies" or as "victims" in preschool (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). If caregivers want to create less stereotyping of some kids as "bad" and others as "good" in classrooms, the challenge may well be to create loving, warm, nurturing relationships with all the children. Once these intimate bonds have been developed, the child labeled as "bad" by peers can use a newly developing secure attachment to the teacher to behave in more cooperative ways that lessen the chances for stigmatization. The teacher will also work creatively with the whole class to lessen the stereotype that peers have conjured. Creating nurturing, intimate interactions that lure little ones into secure attachments is a technique to decrease stereotyping of certain children as the "bad kids" in the classroom (Honig, 2002).

Modeling

How we talk about others impacts young children. We need to find the positives (and note them out loud) about every child in the classroom. Using the technique of the "Kindness Jar" is one way. Talk out loud each day as you note a kindly, thoughtful, or empathic response; hurry to write it down on a piece of paper and add that paper to others in your "Kindness Jar." The kids catch on quickly!

Integrated classrooms

Children who experience many different kinds of playmates in their nursery environment will find differences in accent, ethnicity, skin color, clothing, etc. much less important than the wonderful experience of having play partners they enjoy. An integrated classroom, where teachers have enough support staff to help children with special needs, provides a natural milieu for youngsters to become comfortable with a variety of others (Neugebauer & Wolf, 2004).

Bibliotherapy

Storybooks can assist a teacher in promoting peer acceptance rather than stereotyping and rejection of *"different"* others. The book *Nick Joins In* tells the story of a wheelchair-bound child who saves the day in the gym when the ball gets stuck on some ceiling bars. He quickly wheels his chair to where the janitor keeps the long pole for opening high gym windows. With the pole, the children are able to get down the ball and the play goes on, thanks to Nick. In the story *Crow Boy*, a poor farmer's child walks miles to the Japanese village school, where the other children ostracize him for his "different" ways. When the teacher learns that the boy has the special ability to use a bird call to call down crows from the sky, the teacher realizes that he, too, misjudged this child and is then able to get the other children to admire the boy's special skill. Some picture books incite more compassion for those who are ridiculed for being different. Dr. Seuss's books featuring Horton the Elephant are admirable examples. In the book *Otto's Trunk*, an elephant with a trunk much smaller than the other preschooler elephants is jeered at and called "little squirt." Their scorn turns to admiration when Otto discovers a talent of his own — he can snort in different ways to create a menagerie. The high-spirited badger in *Best Friends for Frances* is grumpy that Albert and Harold, who are playing ball, say that "she is not much good" at baseball and "besides this is a no-girls game." Frances realizes that earlier in the day she had snubbed her little sister Gloria in much the same way, saying that she was "not much good" with a ball. So Frances goes home and offers to play as an accepting and helpful older sister with little Gloria. Next day, both sisters go off on a picnic. They carry a sign that says: "Best friends outing. NO BOYS." When Albert sees the sign AND the lusciously filled picnic hamper, he begins to realize there surely is a down side

to excluding girls from games! Little sister Gloria urges Frances to accept him (if he promises to catch a snake for her at the pond!). Once Albert promises that there will no longer be "no-girls" baseball games, Frances crosses off the words "NO BOYS" on her sign. Off the friends go to have a splendid adventurous afternoon on the hill by the pond. And Albert does catch a snake for Gloria! Reading picture books that increase empathy and decrease ostracizing others will increase class sensitivity to and acceptance of differences as a natural part of our wondrous human family.

Reinforce children's interest in a variety of toys and activities

Teachers who encourage little girls who assert that they want to grow up to become doctors or soccer players are helping to decrease the stereotype that little girls mostly want to be ballerinas. Teachers can become participants in activities where both boys and girls share a variety of roles. Rather than passively standing by and watching while boys play "firechief" and girls dress up as "brides," teachers need actively to enter into the spirit of a pretend game. Personally involve both boys and girls to don the yellow dress-up clothes of fire fighters so that all the kids can "help put out a fire" and "save the kids in the burning house." Teachers can create group games that involve lots of activity (that preschool boys often do prefer) that require group helpfulness to keep the game going. Holding on the fringes of a parachute and running in a great circle, and then running inward to collapse the parachute and then out again to re-create the billowing circle, is one such game.

On the playground, it is helpful to have a large group swing. There, several children, boys and girls, need to pump energetically to keep the swing in motion as they all hang on firmly and work together as a "team" to keep the swing in motion. These cooperative activities are another way to ensure that the children will not always be playing in sex-stereotyped ways, but can cooperate in games together. A three-legged race, where two children side by side have their inner legs in one burlap sack, is a good game to pair a boy and girl together. The game becomes even more exciting, and cooperative, when each partner must help steady a large spoon with an egg on it while they hobble along as fast as they can in the race of three-legged partners. When teachers take preschoolers on a trip to a park or wooded area, then boys and girls together can search for leaves of different trees, catch grasshoppers gently, and try to spy frogs in a pond. On a trip to a supermarket, all the children can chime in to decide which peppers have the smoothest skin and which apples the

teacher should buy so that they can make applesauce together back at their center.

Cooking is another activity, where a boy or girl can be "chef" and help the team get ingredients together and make cookies or shred lettuce leaves for a salad or prepare peanut butter sandwiches for snack time for all. Caregivers can ask children at circle time what they want to be when they grow up, and then offer encouraging affirmation when children mention non-stereotypic vocations.

Visit old age homes

Some children think of older women as "witches" and stereotype all older folks as incompetent and scary. A program that builds in regular visits to old age homes can help decrease this stereotype. Planning helps. When the children draw pictures, make collages, learn a group song to sing for the elderly, the smiles and appreciation they receive will help decrease stereotypes about "scary old people."

Cross-age tutoring

Sometimes children show intolerance of children who are slower or younger or still in diapers in a preschool classroom. Set up buddy systems that involve children working together or teaching each other something one knows but the other child does not. Working together often creates a familiar comfortable feeling, and the child who stereotyped another as a "baby" for still sucking a thumb, for example, may forget the pejorative feeling while working together on a group project, such as drawing a wall mural with a sea theme that includes fishes, boats, swimmers, whales, and big waves.

Use videos to decrease stereotypes

Many television programs reinforce sex-role and other stereotypes. Videos shown to preschoolers should be chosen carefully to counteract stereotyping! For example, "Finding Nemo" shows a father fish in a nurturing, caring role with his son, rather than as a macho male figure. If you tape television shows, select shows such as "Dragon Tales" which evenly treat the girl and boy protagonists as competent and friendly, rather than showing a predominant male figure.

Invite moral mentors as visitors to the classroom

Invite people from different walks of society and different ethnic groups to visit the classroom. They may dress in

different clothes from their own country and explain different customs, such as a piñata at parties. They may play an instrument, such as a samisen, that the children have never seen. Although children may at first seem wary of folks who look different from themselves, their fascination with the visitor's stories, songs, and special offerings can dispel stereotypes the children may have had about another culture group.

Invite helpers, such as folks who fight fires or deliver mail. Children are very curious about jobs. An older teen who coaches handicapped kids in swimming would make a great moral mentor to invite to the classroom. Try to invite persons who defy ordinary stereotypes. Some preschoolers believe that only men can be doctors and only women can be nurses. Invite a female doctor and a male nurse to come talk about their jobs in the classroom.

Talk with the children about the difference between actions that are *"morally"* not okay such as deliberately hurting another person, or things that are socially not approved of, such as wearing socks on top of the head! Research shows that children whose parents hold more rigid views in confounding moral and social "rightness" show more stereotyping.

Lure children to use a variety of toys

Arrange toys so that boys and girls find them attractive. Cheerfully and creatively engage groups in play with the toys despite the children's stereotypic belief that certain toys are only for boys or only for girls. During ongoing housekeeping play use ingenuity to suggest roles and responsibilities that cut across gender stereotypes (Honig, 2000).

Talk with parents

During parent meetings, teachers will want to clarify the goal of having a classroom that accepts many different kinds of persons and abilities. Some parents may believe that it is "shameful" for a boy to wash dishes or clean up. Stay calm and gentle in describing the ways in which your classroom is trying to promote acceptance of others and acceptance of the many rich roles we can all play to make life happier and more peaceful with each other. Be sure to ask parents to share with you times they have observed their child being kind and playing well with children from different groups

and express your admiration of parents' values. Share your insights and techniques that have helped the children in your group to become more accepting and able to treat with respect and care peers who are different from them.

Although research shows that young boys do prefer more rough and tumble games and games with high activity level, and are often less verbal than little girls, teachers can use ingenuity to create many opportunities for enjoyable group games and imaginative pretend scenarios where the skills and active participation of both boys and girls enrich play for all. Sex role stereotyping is much less likely when children have had a good time playing together, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or typicality.

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Out of Site But Not Out of Mind: The Harmful Absence of Men

by Bruce Cunningham and Bernie Dorsey

Over the years we have spoken on the topic of male involvement at many conferences, workshops, and staff meetings. We are often asked a variety of questions on how to involve fathers and other men in the lives of children. Recently, we were asked a particularly intriguing question by the director of a child care center.

In this situation, a single father enrolled his child in the director's child care center. When the father was asked about the child's mother he replied that the mother was "not in the picture." This alone is not so unusual because approximately 20% of single parents are fathers according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. What was unusual was the staffing at the child care center. The classroom into which the child entered had a man as the teacher and another man as the teacher assistant.

The director describing this situation felt the quality of care in the classroom was very good and did not doubt that the child would be well cared for. Yet the questions asked of us were, "Doesn't this child need to be around women? Won't the child be deprived if raised only around men? Won't the child only learn about women from distorted images in the media? And what if the father is saying uncomplimentary things about the mother — won't that damage this child's view of women now and later in life?"

The person asking these questions was genuinely concerned, and the questions were remarkable. Remarkable not for what they asked, but for what they didn't ask about the more common absence of men in the lives of children. It is much more common in early childhood programs that a single mother enrolls a child. It is more common that no one inquires about the presence of a father or other man in that child's life. It is more common that the child's teachers and caregivers will all be women. The number of men teaching in pre-kindergarten programs is estimated by a recent survey of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to be about 3%. The number of men teaching in elementary grades is estimated by the National Education Association for Elementary Teachers to be 13%, with most of these found in the fifth and sixth grades.

Furthermore, it is more common that the child will learn a good deal of what they know about men from television and other media sources. A 1999 study by the National Fatherhood Initiative found that television programs seldom featured fathers and when they did, fathers were likely to be portrayed as a competent man yet uninvolved father or an involved father yet an incompetent man. Another 1999 study, "Boys to Men: Media Messages About Masculinity" by the advocacy group Children Now, found that television programs most often portrayed men as violent and angry and rarely showed men in nurturing or home life situations.

The director who asked the questions during the training was correct in that children are strongly influenced by the experiences they have over time. She was right that children need men and women in their lives. And she was reassured to hear that the child in this situation will have positive personal experiences with women — if not in the child care center then certainly later on in school.

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Bernie Dorsey is the founder of Conscious Fathering Programs. His "Skills for New Dads" hospital based program has graduated over 3,000 men in the Puget Sound area and in addition, over 11,000 of *Bernie's Guide for Expectant Fathers* have been distributed statewide. Bernie is also one of the recipients of the Governor's 2002 Award for Advocacy of Child Abuse Prevention. As a member of the Leadership Group for the Washington State Fathering Coalition, Bernie continues to work at encouraging parentally balanced programs for families.

Unfortunately, many children do not have men as positive role models while growing up. Many children do not get the benefits in intellectual development and social competence that an involved man contributes. According to a 1999 Child Trends Research Brief, these contributions come through parenting and play styles of fathers that are unique from those of mothers. It is not reassuring that children are being harmed by this absence of men.

To address this more common situation, child care centers can take the following actions:

- Shift your view from fathers (which tends to connotes the biological father only) to fathering (men who nurture children including biological fathers). The biological father plays a critical role in our culture, in the lives of children, and in the importance of knowing about the genetic influences in your own family health history. Yet many men can fulfill the nurturing role of fathering by being that positive man in the life of a child.

- Help each family identify a man for each child at the time of enrollment. This can be the biological father, a step-father, a grandfather, uncle, or family friend. Any man who has a positive relationship with a child can build on that relationship to benefit the child.

- Inform families of your center philosophy that children already have both men and women who are already involved in their lives. Identify, reach out, and support these adults in their involvement with their child. Make your expectations clear that both parents — or a man and a woman — are expected to participate in center activities such as parent conferences.

- Send program information to the men. A man can be involved with a child only when he knows what is going on in the life of that child. Early childhood programs can communicate much through newsletters, by talking with men, and by personally inviting men to attend parent and family events.

- Recruit men into the program as staff and regular volunteers. Many men, from high school students to senior citizens, enjoy spending time with young children and will do so if asked and welcomed.

- Inform men about special programs for new dads even if they are already a father. A growing number of these programs, such as Boot Camp for New Dads and

Conscious Fathering reach men through childbirth classes. These programs offer information tailored to men at a highly teachable moment, even if the child to be born is not their first.

While men are often out of child care sites, they are seldom out of the minds of children. These actions can help child care programs connect more children with men. As a result, we will have strong programs for families and better lives for children.

Resources to support directors, staff, and families

- Boot Camp for New Dads
  www.newdads.com

- Child Trends
  www.childtrends.org

- Children Now
  www.childrennow.org

- Conscious Fathering Programs
  www.helpfordads.com

- National Fatherhood Initiative
  www.fatherhood.org

- National Association for the Education of Young Children
  www.naeyc.org
  (printed brochures *Involving Men in the Lives of Children*, order #593 and *Careers for Men in Early Childhood Education*, order #594)

Developing Sexual Identity Through Play, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Tolerance

by Lynn Baynum

"Mommy, what does the word gay mean?" My husband and I were sitting at the dinner table with our three children when our eight-year-old son asked this innocent, yet controversial question. My husband and I agree on honest and direct answers to our children's questions. We also realize that our children need to be developmentally ready to accept our answers.

As my son sat waiting for an answer, my husband and I eyed each other and whispered that this was the time to give two definitions for the word gay. My husband told our son that gay was an adjective used long ago to signify happiness. I told him that today we use the word "gay" to describe two adults of the same sex living together as a family. The room was quiet for a moment until our daughter, a ten-year-old identical twin, said, "Well, if they live together, then I guess they are happy."

This conversation was a priceless moment, yet one that is not unique. One day our daughter reported to the babysitter that sometimes girls date other girls. The babysitter didn't know how to respond and told me of the incident. As parents and educators we need to be ready to respond to children's sexual comments. At various times during their childhood, my children have asked me about relationship and sexuality. These questions are as powerful as, "Who am I?" and "How do I fit in this world?" I believe that the discussions and comments parents share with children help shape children's perceptions of themselves and society.

It is ideal to hope that parents are articulate and respectful in their representation of sexual issues. But in reality, some parents may not feel comfortable talking about sexual issues

with their children. Parents may simply relate their own experiences and expectations. Parents may describe their adolescent behavior as a means of communicating acceptable behavior. Parents may even express prejudicial views toward groups or lifestyle choices.

In order to address children's questions and curiosity in a responsible and developmental manner, some parents look to their children's peer group for support. Parents may rely on peers to describe acceptable preferences and opinions. This is the avenue my parents chose. I remember my friends and I huddled on the playground talking about the differences between boys and girls. We talked about kissing and dating. We talked about babies. We talked about sex. While I respect the impact peer cultures can have on fostering identity, as an educator I recognize the positive impact a school setting can have in a child's development.

Parents rely on child care professionals as surrogate care-givers. Parents support the mission of child care centers and schools. They buy into the academic and social agendas that these systems provide. So too, parents should rely on schools and child care systems to describe healthy attitudes toward sexuality. It is the partnership between parents and educators that benefits children's development.

In the 1970s my school district began a sexual education program in middle school. My physical education teacher described the anatomy of sex, but not the intimacy or emotions involved. This sterile course raised more questions than it provided answers. Today, educators realize that biology alone is not the only answer children seek in discovering their sexual identity. With a common vision and mission articulating acceptance during this journey of self-discovery, parents and educators can enhance understanding. Parents and educators must work together to define a culture of beliefs.

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I have used a framework for discussing sexual development focused on the acronym of PACT. This PACT model is based on a common mission of Play, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Tolerance. I propose that parents and educators join together in a common PACT to address the needs of young children, primary-aged children, and adolescents. Parents and child care providers can meet to describe the goals of the PACT. They can build the structure of experiences. They can plan particular experiences that support the PACT. The following ideas are the basis for the PACT model.

Create a Culture of Play: Development learning stations are powerful. Use centers to create play experiences relating to family roles. Instead of mom and dad roles, encourage the children to be nurturers. Use the housekeeping center to have children try different roles: diaper changer, bottle warmer, and soother.

Encourage language development opportunities. Allow opportunities for children to describe the responsibilities associated with the nurturing role. Use Language Experience Approach (LEA) to articulate children's perceptions. Ask children to dictate stories to the teacher describing nurturing roles. Read aloud these stories during circle time. Encourage parents to write stories with their children as homework assignments. Share LEA stories.

Create a Culture of Acceptance: Circle time is useful. Create sharing experiences that describe and accept families. Create a class tree similar to a family tree. Display photos or illustrations of children and their families. This visual representation of the variety of people who are significant in children's lives is important in showcasing many types of families. The class tree also highlights the diversity within families, be it single parents, grandparents, or siblings.

The class tree tells the story of the children and who is important to them. Video tape the children describing their family during share time and make the tape available for families to watch. Sharing the video of the class tree supports the mission of the PACT.

Create a Culture of Curiosity: Thematic instruction is compelling.
■ Use the theme of individuality to foster curiosity and diversity.
■ Define the theme of individuality through a connection between the human body and families.
■ Use literature that describes the human body and bodily functions.
■ Share cultural representations of families.

■ Create a word wall of terms and trace classmates as the basis for large cut-a-way diagrams of body parts.
■ Sing the head, shoulders, knees, and toes song using medical terms such as cranium, scapula, patella, and metatarsals.
■ Base the theme on informative and narrative literature.
■ Select literature that describes various types of families.
■ Read literature that supports family relationships.
■ Compare and contrast different types of families and family choices.
■ Use Venn diagrams (two connected circles) as a graphic organizer. List descriptive words in the circles to compare and contrast types of families. The Venn diagram visually describes individual families.
■ Invite parents to a celebration day complete with activities and presentations to culminate the individuality theme.

Create a Culture of Tolerance: Role playing is informative.
■ Use role playing situations to refine a language of tolerance.
■ Demonstrate strategies that mediate children's conflicts and support cooperative development.
■ Involve parents and peers in the role playing.
■ At the beginning of the school day, encourage parents to arrive a few minutes early to role play.
■ Ask siblings to participate in problem solving situations focusing on real world experiences.

Center directors can organize support groups of parents and teachers who meet to discuss concerns and needs of the center community. Survey group members for topics and find resources to spark discussions. Share a library of articles and books that address the concerns of the group. Offer breakfast meetings, online discussions, and telephone supportive chats that match parents and professionals. Ask community service personnel to join the discussion groups. Work in a PACT to develop a mission of play, acceptance, curiosity, and tolerance.

A few years ago a five year old, blond-haired, blue eyed girl entered my kindergarten class. She had recently moved to the northeastern part of the United States with her younger brother, father, maternal aunt, maternal uncle, and his life partner. This family arrangement was unusual in my small town. As a teacher, I began to learn about the intricate relationships and responsibilities in this family, and that knowledge helped to shape my definition of family. The father worked as an unskilled laborer, the aunt stayed home to care for the two young children, and the uncle and his partner also contributed to the family income. I saw a group of adults dedicated to raising happy and healthy children — a family that seemed different from the traditional definition, but offered a PACT for defining childhood explorations in sexual development.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

HEALTHY SEXUALITY DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN — Studying sexuality development: Chrisman and Couchenour contend that having a good understanding of the developmental issues related to sexuality takes some study and work. Find ways to explore this developmental area to extend your staff's knowledge and understanding. A great place to start might be to do a book club with the *Healthy Sexuality Development in Young Children*. Or plan a staff meeting to explore the differences between adult and child sexuality, helping teachers reflect on the ways they are similar and different. Or plan some role play sessions to practice responding to sexuality issues that arise in the classroom.

It's in the handbook!: Having good written explanations of your understanding and planned responses to dealing with children's sexuality is recommended by Chrisman and Couchenour. Do you have such policies and practices outlined in your family handbook, board policies, or staff training manual? If not, convene a task force of family members, board members, staff, and other stakeholders to develop such written information. Use the information in this Beginnings Workshop to start this important conversation.

Getting started: In the sidebar, the authors give one example of a way to address children's sexuality without the emotions, hysteria, and embarrassment that arise when children engage in normal explorations of similarities and differences. Work with teachers to develop similar materials (notes to parents, newsletter articles, etc.) to serve as a starting point to use if such situations arise or to provide family education regarding how your school will address children's normal sexuality development.

It's different than child abuse: The important point raised in this article is the confusion that some may have about the connection between children's developing sexuality and child abuse. Make sure your staff is clear about the difference by providing training aimed at clarifying and understanding how these two different topics relate and differ. Use an expert from the Child Abuse Prevention Network or a psychologist or social worker with a good understanding of both issues.

HOW TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT COUNTERACTS STEREOTYPING — Say no more!: Sometimes there is no need to elaborate on the information in Beginnings Workshop articles! Honig provides us with a step by step strategy for addressing stereotyping. Start with her first suggestion of recognizing our own stereotypes and biases and work your way through this wonderful list of things we all "can do" to address this important topic.

OUT OF SITE BUT NOT OUT OF MIND: THE HARMFUL ABSENCE OF MEN — Having no men is a problem?: It may come as a surprise to some teachers that the absence of fathering figures is a disadvantage to young children. Explore the ways fathering figures and mothering figures contribute differently to children's development in a staff meeting designed to start this important discussion. Get to know the research and understand the implications for your program by researching some of the resources identified in the article. Develop an action plan to change what you can to make fathering figures available and included in all of the program's activities.

So many ideas and so little time: Cunningham and Dorsey cut straight to the point by suggesting several specific and applicable ideas for increasing the presence of men who are fathering in our schools and centers. Which ones do your teachers feel might work? Implement some and brainstorm more to make sure your children benefit from both mothering and fathering and the unique contributions each make to growing up healthy and happy.

DEVELOPING HEALTHY SEXUAL IDENTITY THROUGH PLAY, ACCEPTANCE, CURIOSITY, AND TOLERANCE — What is your program's culture of beliefs?: The perfect place to start exploring how your program will address children's sexuality is to work together to define the beliefs that all stakeholders can embrace and agree upon. Start this conversation by sharing this article with a task force of stakeholders and use it as springboard to define your culture of beliefs and develop your PACT plan.

Gee, I never thought about that!: Baynum has wrapped up the perfect gift to help us take action on this important topic. An acronym (PACT); wonderful suggestions of where to start that can be used as springboards to our own creativity in the classroom; ideas for sending the message of tolerance and acceptance home to families.