

CFLE Network Article: For Young Children It's About Science, Not S-E-X!

By Deborah M. Roffman, M.S., CFLE, CSE

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CFLE IN CONTEXT

For Young Children It’s About Science, Not S-E-X!

By Deborah M. Roffman, M.S., CFLE, CSE

Whenever people ask me how I became a sexuality and Family Life Educator, I chuckle to myself about the preface to my first book and its laugh-out-loud title: “My Mother Always Wanted Me to Be a Sex Educator, and Other Myths.”

As I wrote then, life is full of unpredictable twists, but in my case, it made a full hairpin turn. I truly don’t know of anyone less destined for a career in sex education. In one old, recurring nightmare, I run into an old boyfriend from college. When he learns what I do for a living, he can be heard laughing

about anyone off the street and make them into a sexuality educator, thereby proving there is hope for us all!

Astonishingly, by lunchtime on that very first day on the job decades ago, I knew with certainty that I’d found my “forever”



Deborah M. Roffman

Kids raised in families and who attend schools with an atmosphere of openness about sexuality-related knowledge grow up healthier along a great variety of vital sexual health indicators.

uncontrollably. They finally have to sedate him to get him to stop. It is very embarrassing. As for my mother, she and I barely discussed anything as sensitive as periods, so if she had hopes or dreams of my becoming a sexuality educator when I grew up, she never mentioned them.

So how did I end up in this most unlikely of professions? Completely by accident I can assure you. A couple of years out of college, I needed a new job and, on a tip, interviewed for a position as a community educator at the local Planned Parenthood affiliate. To this day, I still don’t know why I was hired. Sometimes I think the education director simply wanted to demonstrate that you could literally take just

professional home. I had learned more in those first 3 hours about the meaning of sexuality in people’s lives—and how to help myself and others think about it—than in all of my previous years put together. While the Johns Hopkins and University of Maryland professors who spoke at the workshop I attended that morning presented on three separate topics, each in their own way had taught the very same lesson, one that I still make use of every day: contextualize, contextualize, contextualize! Because most Americans are trained by culture to think about sexuality in the most reductionistic and concrete of terms, I realized that giving both students and adults opportunities to step back and grasp a larger conceptual picture is essential to self-reflection, personal growth, and critical thinking.

Because there were so few of us in the field back then—the term *sexuality education* had only been coined a couple of years earlier—the importance of “step back” was reinforced over and over again in my ongoing work. There were very few good resources for us new to the field at the time, yet before I could



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blink, I was being asked to teach and train others; it fell on all of us to learn as quickly as possible (mostly by trial and error) and then teach the next person to do the same. As a result, practically from the very first day I entered a sexuality classroom, I've brought a triple layer of step-back questions: What's the best and quickest way to get this lesson across? Exactly what's working, what isn't, and why? What did I learn today about teaching, and how can I most effectively pass it on?

Imagining a PreK- Through 12th-Grade Focus

My vocational journey took a turn again when my beloved supervisor and mentor at Planned Parenthood accepted a new position at the Park School of Baltimore, where she later invited me to teach human sexuality education. Starting out with high school classes and then adding the middle and eventually the elementary divisions as well, I knew I needed to step back, again, to imagine broad contextual frames for devising an intentional, spiraling, and developmentally based human sexuality curriculum. That work is ongoing and will continue to be so as the world in which children and adolescents are growing up evolves rapidly around them.

Absent these supports, children will eventually take their normal, natural curiosity elsewhere.

Having worked with hundreds of public and private schools across the country, I can think of no better place for this kind of ongoing "imagining" than Baltimore's Park School. As an independent school unencumbered by state and county mandates or restrictions on "sex education," Park's child-centered approach aligns seamlessly with an open-minded approach to sexuality and other "sensitive" subjects. But the receptivity there goes far beyond that.

Park School is a place where the adults in the building—and the parents as well—are hardly ever afraid of the wrong things. The philosophy has always been that sexuality education is right and good and healthy for children of all ages, so that when I arrived on the scene with the teaching experience needed to start the ball rolling, I received only one guideline: "Always listen first, and lesson plan later." As a result, it's my students who

have educated me about what they need and want to know about sexuality from the immediate adults in their lives and from each other. And because I've felt so privileged to be teaching sexuality education in this utopian setting, from the very beginning I've tried my best, through publications, presentations, and trainings, to share everything I was so fortunate to be learning to parents and other educators as quickly as I could.

Making Sexuality Education the Same Not Different

After publishing my first book, *Sex and Sensibility*, I began visiting schools in various parts of the country to give talks for parents and provide training for faculties. My widespread travels have given me opportunities to confirm that the misguided attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality education—especially for young children—that I'd been hearing along the East Coast for so many years were in fact deep-rooted (and still are) all across the United States. The specific reservations parents and schools shared with me revealed the exact same misplaced fears and diffuse anxieties I'd heard so often before: "But that's too much information too soon!" "Won't they act on it?" "But they'll lose their innocence!" "Don't you have to wait until they ask?" "What if they keep on asking questions?" "What if they tell other children?" "What if *my child* isn't ready?"

Consider the striking double standards embedded in those sentiments. Parents, teachers, and administrators readily embrace the acquisition of knowledge as positive, healthy, and essential, yet this particular kind of knowledge, especially for young children, is to be considered "inherently suspect and potentially harmful." This belief system, baked into our culture long ago (I can trace these myths back in surprising ways to the Puritans), belies what we know from decades of research: Kids raised in families and who attend schools with an atmosphere of openness about sexuality-related knowledge grow up healthier along a great variety of vital sexual health indicators.

Moreover, postponing the giving of information until children are supposedly "ready" flies in the face of accepted pedagogical practice, as educators know that, in regard to every other subject, children learn best when information is taught within an intentional spiral of increasingly sophisticated information and concepts. In stark contrast,

most schools in the United States are 3 to 7 years late in providing basic benchmarks of information even about human reproduction, waiting instead until children are in the fourth or fifth grades, in anticipation of puberty, to do an “information dump” with the expectation that kids will suddenly be able to absorb it all at once. Front-loading and then gradually spiraling information is critical, whether the subject matter is long division or human reproduction.

The Cognitive Deficits We Create

It’s vital for educators to know—and shout from the rooftops—that when families and schools neglect the kind of sexuality education young children truly need and deserve, their learning capacity going forward will be severely compromised. In my experience, unless adults intentionally begin educating children by Grade 3, at the latest, much of the learning they’ll need beyond that point will of necessity have to be remedial. Children are certainly not growing up in a vacuum; titillating references to sexuality are everywhere in American society, and much of their “education” will also come from peers, friends, classmates, off-handed comments from kids passing in the hallway, older siblings, and even cousins who live clear across the country. Later on, we can help them unlearn the incorrect “facts” they’ve absorbed, but what children learn first is often what “sticks”; chances are good that it just might resurface months or even years later. Just think about the implications of that for middle and high school teachers trying to get across important, complex new information and concepts with kids who do not possess a solid foundation of correct knowledge or ways of thinking.

So, when are young kids truly “old enough” to learn about “sex”?

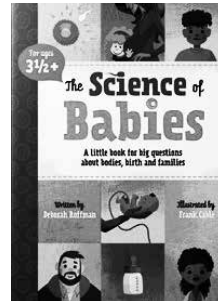
This question—one of the most frequently asked by parents and teachers—reveals the powerful yet invisible role that adult projection plays in justifying the postponement of sexuality education. When young children begin to ask questions about their birth “origins,” anxious adults often think to themselves, “Oh no, I have to tell them about SEX!? They’re not ready for that!” For many, deciding to avoid, distract, make up silly stories, or otherwise punt seems the logical, prudent path. But by erroneously projecting onto children the questions they themselves are most worried about having

to answer, they don’t stop to think about what these questions might mean from behind the eyes of children.

The Science of Babies

We need to realize: Young children don’t know about adult sex, don’t want to know about it, don’t need to know about it, and don’t care about it one whit! Plus, their readiness to learn the “facts of life” is *not emotional*. It’s *cognitive*. And it’s not about sex. It’s about science.

For decades now, I’ve been asking parents and educators to tell me from their experience the questions young children ask about their “origins” and at what ages they typically ask. Here’s what they say: Age 4: “Where did I come from?” Age 5: “How did I get out of there?” Age 6: “How did I get in there in the first place?”



The amazing consistency of the questions children ask convinced me long ago that this spontaneous, clear-cut sequence of questions in reality reflects young children’s increasing cognitive sophistication about objective reality in very particular scientific ways. Whereas most 3-year-olds think everything disappears when they close their eyes, four-year-olds know everything’s still there and has a separate reality; they also begin to understand “time” in rudimentary ways (as in, “before,” “now,” “later”). Five-year-olds, on the other hand, are newly able to grasp more dynamic scientific concepts such as “movement through time and space,” whereas six-year-olds—sometimes referred to as “young scientists”—can understand and begin to apply the principle of cause and effect. And so, all this neatly explains why many 4- to 6-year-olds want to know “Where was I before I was here?” (a uterus). “How did I get out of there?” (labor and delivery). And, finally, “What caused me?” (Sperm, egg, and how they get together). Those who don’t ask about “origins” are simply too busy discovering the very same scientific principles in other ways.

When a Canadian publisher invited me a couple of years ago to collaborate on a book for young children about their “origins,” I leapt at the chance. I saw it as an opportunity

to help dispel the cultural mythology, false protectiveness, and harmful double standards that leave so many adults so ill-informed about children’s true educational needs. *The Science of Babies: A Little Book for Big Questions About Bodies, Birth, and Families*, the first board book on this topic for children aged 3.5 to 8 years, is written for kids, parents, caretakers, and teachers. Its intention is to help jumpstart open, comfortable conversations between young children and the primary nurturing adults in their lives, all within the *context* (there’s that word again) of young children’s expected timetable of cognitive development and unfolding curiosities about science (not sex). Just think about how much more smoothly later conversations will proceed as children grow up and into early, middle, and late adolescence with all those years of trusting and honest communication behind them.

Remember, Always, to Look Out at the World through the Eyes of Young Children

When the immediate nurturing adults in children’s lives meet them where they are, rather than imposing preconceived ideas (or even worse, self-serving political agendas) about where they are or should be, children thrive. Absent these supports, children will eventually take their normal, natural curiosity elsewhere. Given the increasingly ugly default options accessible to them—and the decades of research demonstrating that families and schools are the most powerful protective factors in children’s lives—the path forward is clear.

It’s human sexuality and Family Life Educators who can take them there. ✨

Deborah M. Roffman, M.S., CFLE, CSE, has worked at the cutting edge of the field of human sexuality education since its inception. Author of three renowned books for parents and teachers, she has taught sexuality education in Grades 3 through 12 and consulted with more than 400 schools and youth serving organizations across the United States. The recipient of the coveted 2022 Golden Brick Award for lifetime achievement in the profession, she recently published *The Science of Babies: A Little Book for Big Questions About Bodies, Birth, and Families* for young children and their parents and educators.

Reference

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