

TELLING CHILDREN ABOUT SEX

Should There Be Instruction In The Schools?

"MUMMIE," said a small voice in my ear the other day, "I know how babies come."

"Do you," I said, with some apprehension, "and how do they come?"

"I'm not going to tell," said Sonia, aged eight, with the knowing giggle that is reserved for sex secrets by the very young. "Iris told me!" Iris, too, is eight, but a much more knowing, whispering eight than my little Sonia. So Sonia and I sat down on the chesterfield while I tried to explain to an eight-year-old mind that a method of reproduction that is ordained by Nature cannot be either wrong, vulgar or amusing. To Sonia it was evidently all of these things. Had not the knowledge just reached her, told in a quiet corner from behind her informant's hand to the accompaniment of a chorus of giggles? Obviously it was both wrong and amusing.

That Part Was Easy

I felt a little guilty and rather sad about this. I had meant to forestall "the other children" and tell Sonia myself. Sonia has always known where babies

—asks M. R. KENT in this article for "The Listener"

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came from. We got that over with when she was very young. We were washing up one day. Sonia said, "Mummie, where did the dishpan come from?"

"Why, from the store of course!" I said.

"Where did the storeman get it?"

"From the factory where it is made."

"Where did the cups come from?"

"They came from the store, too. And the storeman got them from the factory. And the factory man got them from earth that was dug up out of the ground and made into cups." Silence for half a minute. Then, "Mummie, where do babies come from?"

"Why, they grow inside their mothers' bodies, of course, just as the egg comes from the hen, and the little chick comes from the egg."

"Oh. Well, where did the sink come from?" And so on.

That part was easy. I had always meant to answer truthfully any questions that Sonia asked, particularly about sex. But it seems that sometimes



... We shall have to do something about the parents

the knowledge comes to them before they are even curious enough to ask for it.

Sonia Is Lucky

So now Sonia knows, and although I did my best to erase the muddy impression of the first telling, I suppose there will always be a faint smudge in that part of her mind where sex knowledge is stored.

And yet, on the whole, Sonia is lucky. At the age of eight she already knows how babies are born, and why, and where they come from. She knows that mothers go to the hospital so that the doctor can help the baby into the world, and she knows that all Nature goes through something of the same process. There are still a lot of details to be filled in to make Sonia's knowledge complete, and when she asks for them they will be given her.

At the age of 18 my generation knew rather less than Sonia does now. They surmised a great deal, but they weren't sure of very much, and over the whole business hung a murky pall of parental secrecy. We wanted to know about sex. We felt that we ought to know, but did not dare to ask our parents. But times have changed, and this leads us to the question of whether or not children should be educated in matters of sex. My own answer is an emphatic "Yes."

Start in the Home

How then, shall we set about this education? Shall we include it in the public school curriculum? Shall we take it along with our arithmetic and geography and reading and writing from Miss Jones, who teaches say, Standards 1 and 2? Shall we start in the home, or shall we leave it all until a child reaches a more mature age, a secondary school age, for instance?

I am all for starting in the home, when the child asks its first sex question. Usually it is the simple, "Where did baby brother come from?" All the answer it needs is a simple statement in plain words. A little child's mind is crystal-clear. There is nothing murky in it, even about sex, until someone puts it there. He accepts the origin of the baby

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