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Sex Ed for the Stroller Set

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THIS September 3-year-old Halley Vollmar of Bellmore, N.Y., was having her annual checkup when her pediatrician paused. "I'm going to check your peepee now," he warned, and tugged down her underwear. But Halley protested. "Mommy, why he call my vagina a peepee?" she scolded, telling the startled physician he was a "silly doctor" before allowing him to proceed.



An illustration by Michael Emberley from "It's Not the Stork," by Robie H. Harris, a sex education book for children age 4 and up, to be published in 2006.

Last week Kristin Hansen, Halley's mother, recounted the story to several other women with a satisfied laugh. The gathering in Wantagh, N.Y., was something of a reunion. Over the summer the mothers had convened weekly for lessons in how to educate their toddlers about sex, a program they found so necessary they are already planning to reconvene next year.

Halley may be surprisingly articulate about her private parts, but she is in excellent company. Like many other parents and educators, the mothers chatting over lemonade and coffee cake in Susan Vartoukian's toy-strewn home maintain that sex education - once and mostly still an awkward fixture of the pubescent years - should begin early. And when they say early, they mean it: preferably from birth, or if not that, from toilet training age. "Parents don't have the luxury of silence anymore," said Nanette Ecker, a sex educator at the Nassau County chapter of Planned Parenthood, who led the group.

For most adults, knowledge of intercourse came as a distinct moment of revelation: an "aha" moment in the schoolyard or the living room when the mysterious connection between body parts and babies was made suddenly and shockingly clear. But now children who are practically babies themselves are learning how babies are made.

According to this approach, toddlers should learn words like "vulva" at the same time they learn "ears" and "toes," benign-sounding myths about storks and seeds constitute harmful misinformation, and any child who can ask about how he or she was created is old enough for a truthful answer.

"People have been told by experts that there's a right age" to learn about intercourse, said Dr. Justin Richardson, a assistant professor of psychiatry at Cornell and Columbia medical schools and an author of "Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid They'd Ask)," one of a number of recently published guides that advocates early tutelage.

"If you're talking about how babies are made, there's no age at which it is harmful to learn that the penis goes into the vagina," he said. "Yes, it's true that exposing a child to sexual stimulation is harmful. But telling a kid how babies are made is very different."

The general cultural environment has become so vulgar, the early-approach advocates say, that sex education has become a race: parents must reach children before other forces - from misinformed playground confidantes to pubescent-looking models posed in their skivvies - do. "We need to get there first," said Deborah M. Roffman, a sex educator and the author of "But How'd I Get in There in the First Place? Talking to Your Young Child About Sex."

If not, these advocates warn, children will gather their impressions anywhere and everywhere: from prime-time television jokes about threesomes, Internet pop-up ads for penis enlargement pills or even more explicit Web sites. When the Rev. Debra Haffner's son typed "Katrina images" into Google's search box for a school project, he ended up staring at photographs that had nothing to do with the hurricane, said Ms. Haffner, a Unitarian Universalist minister and the author of "From Diapers to Dating."

"When parents say to me, 'But my child is too young, I want to keep them safe and innocent for as long as I can,' I say, 'Do you take them grocery shopping?' " Ms. Haffner said, referring to the naughty poses and headlines featured on magazines at the checkout counter.

Early sex education is a small and hard-to-measure movement, but it's a growing one, with advocates like Ms. Roffman, Ms. Haffner and Dr. Richardson writing books and conducting seminars for parents, preschool teachers and day care providers. Many chapters of Planned Parenthood offer workshops on the topic and so do some evangelical Christian churches.

"The classic approach in religious circles has been, shield their innocence for as long as you can, until they're 13, then give them The Talk," said Stanton L. Jones, a professor of psychology and the provost of Wheaton College in Illinois. Dr. Stanton and his wife, Brenna Jones, wrote "The Story of Me," a sex education book for 3-to-5-year-olds. (The book emphasizes God's contribution and traditional gender roles, and says less about intercourse than many of its secular equivalents).

Lately the Joneses "have found a lot of acceptance" for starting sex education early, Mr. Jones said; pastors teach their approach at conferences on family life, and the book is sold by the conservative evangelical group Focus on the Family.

Robie H. Harris, a leading author of sex education books for children, started on the topic in 1994 with "It's Perfectly Normal" for preteenagers. (There are now 400,000 copies in print in the United States and more than a million worldwide.) Since then

she has found herself addressing progressively younger audiences: first with "It's So Amazing," geared to 7-year-olds and up, and now "It's Not the Stork," due this summer, and intended for children as young as 4. In 2008 she is to publish a volume aimed at 2-year-olds. Her steady downward demographic shift, she said, is purely in response to parental demand. "Everyplace I would speak, I would hear, 'I don't know how to talk about this,' " Ms. Harris said.

On the whole, early sex education has attracted little organized resistance. While Ms. Harris's "It's Perfectly Normal" often appears on the American Library Association's annual list of most frequently challenged books - critics object to its references to homosexuality, contraception and masturbation - her work for younger children has drawn less attention. Perhaps this is because early sex education is a matter of parental choice or because the materials tend to concentrate on basic biology and safety.

Rather, the resistance comes from parents who cannot imagine initiating a conversation about sex with children who cannot read a book or ride a bicycle, and haven't yet displayed any curiosity about the matter. Rachel Wolman of Chevy Chase, Md., said she "would definitely not" sit her 3-year-old daughter down "for a birds-and-bees discussion."

"I'm guessing that kids wise up pretty quick by the time they get to 5," she added, "but even at that point, I'm not prepared to have a sit-down to run through how things work."

Jaymi Offir, a mother in Caldwell, N.J., said that introducing the topic to her daughter, Zoe, nearly 4, "would only confuse her."

"Being proactive at sex ed would be more appropriate for 9- or 10-year-olds," she said.

But even if parents of kindergarten-age children aren't prepared to discuss intercourse, early-childhood sex educators urge parents to abandon the usual litany of babyish names for private parts: the rather insulting "weenie" for boys, the murky "down there" for girls and so on. (A 1997 study in the journal *Gender and Psychoanalysis* showed that fewer girls are taught names for their genitals than boys, and that while girls learn the names of male genitals, the reverse is often not the case.)

When showing children their eyes and noses, "we don't say 'blink blink' or 'blow blow,'" said Ms. Ecker of Planned Parenthood.

Instead some toddlers are learning startlingly specific, biologically correct terms that even adults tend to confuse. "It's Not the Stork" includes a drawing of the vas deferens (the tubes that carry sperm); many educators emphasize the difference between the vagina (the tract that connects the uterus to the outside of the body) and the vulva (a collective term for all of the external female genital organs).

Early childhood sex educators also caution parents about never - no matter how mortifying the question - lying to children. Or feeding them benign-sounding half truths. Or even distracting them. "Kids have a right to have this information," Ms. Harris said. "If we ignore it, then the myths and fears start coming in."

The solution, they agree, is to give correct but simple answers. Parents have a tendency to blurt out more than what's needed: answering a question about nipples, say, with a flustered, halting lecture on sexual pleasure.

"If a child holds up a tampon and says, 'What's this?' " said Bill Taverner, the director of education for Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey, "the best answer may just be, 'that's a tampon.' Having a name for something is sometimes enough."

The early education approach has exaggerated the already wide disparities in what various kids know, and some arrive at school so fluent that they fluster their teachers. (Though some public elementary schools do teach sex education, especially [HIV](#) awareness, it's a scattered affair, varying enormously not only by state but by district and even classroom.)

Take Mr. Taverner's son Rob, whose first-grade teacher refused to hang on the bulletin board a drawing on which the child had scrawled, "Sex is when two married people join the egg and the sperm."

Even parents who have embraced this kind of frankness seem somewhat taken aback by it. Back in Wantagh, Diana Lee shook her head over the difference between the rich sexual education her daughter, Alexandra, already had, and the skimpy one she received as a child.

"I was surprised I had to tell her so much at 3 years old," she said. "I'm still waiting for The Talk," she added of her own parents' silence on the matter.

"It's a fun time at dinner now," Ms. Vartoukian, the host of the Wantagh gathering, said, gesturing at her two small boys. "We have The Talk every single night."

[Return to Press Room here.](#)