

Sexuality and the emotions: can they be taught?

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fundacio.grifols@grifols.com www.fundaciogrifols.org

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PRESENTATION

The legislation passed by the Spanish Parliament to regulate abortion is entitled “Basic Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health and the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy”. This title indicates the need to prioritize education in sexual and reproductive health, as in an ideal world the decision to have an abortion would never be due to unwanted pregnancy, currently the most common cause for abortions. Sexual education has long been neglected in Spain. Under Franco, the issue was taboo, while since the transition to democracy in the late 1970s there has been little desire to seriously address it and to implement a reproductive health model which reflects the characteristics of the society in which we live.

Providing sexual education entails at least two things: *a)* helping women who decide to interrupt their pregnancy to take their decision on the basis of full awareness of and responsibility for what is always a difficult and traumatic choice; *b)* educating both boys and girls to learn how to base their sexual relationships on an understanding of the meaning and potential consequences of these relationships, enabling them to take responsibility for their actions. One of the most controversial aspects of the law was the proposal that minors be able to have an abortion without informing their parents. Although this right was subsequently restricted to cases where the relationship between daughter and parents was clearly conflictual, it is nevertheless the case that we are increasingly willing to accept that people of less than 18 years of age possess a degree of maturity equivalent to that which they are assumed to have when reaching the age of legal majority. This approach is at odds with our neglect of education designed to ensure that young people are able to engage in sexual relationships on the basis of understanding and responsibility.

Just as important as the existence of legislation which recognizes the reproductive freedom of women is the implementation of effective measures designed to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. We need to stress prevention, education and the shared responsibility of men and women in transforming the conditions which lead to unplanned pregnancies. In a

report published in 2008, the Council of Europe, while advising member countries to adopt legislation respecting a woman's right to choose, added that this legislation should be accompanied by more effective campaigns to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Put another way, elective abortion should never be seen as just one more method of contraception.

While information is central to the education process, on its own this is not enough. It is not sufficient to distribute condoms and teach people how to use them, and nor can we simply step up birth control campaigns. Educating people to act in an informed, responsible manner is more than just a question of information, and this is why we must stress the need for policies and programmes which promote genuine sexual education.

This is no easy task, particularly in today's society, where all the information young people receive through the media provides a message which runs counter to the education they need. But the scale of the challenge is no reason for ignoring it. The experience of some countries which have taken sexual education seriously, such as the Netherlands, shows that it is possible for abortion rates to fall instead of rising, as has happened in most countries which have legalized abortion. The new law grants greater freedom to women when it comes to deciding whether to have an abortion. However, with this freedom should come greater responsibility.

To help address this issue, the Víctor Grifols i Lucas Foundation organized a discussion with a group of education experts sharing a particular interest in the area of sex education. The day began with a paper by Rosa Ros, someone with many years of experience in this area, who also chaired the discussion session. This exchange is summarized in this monograph, which is designed to provide those responsible for education with a set of ideas, opinions and questions about this very important issue.

Victòria Camps
President

1. Introduction

While it is indeed true that simply being able to freely discuss an issue as controversial as that of emotional and sexual education represents a significant step, it is also clear that this progress has been predominantly theoretical rather than practical.

It is now accepted that knowledge acquired as a result of ongoing health education in childhood and early adolescence may help strengthen the individual's personality and self-esteem, to develop his or her identity, and to promote the adoption of positive attitudes towards emotions, relationships with others, sexuality, etc.

Today's adolescents are as vulnerable as their parents were in the face of the new situations and emotions which are part and parcel of the process of growing towards adulthood. More information, greater press freedom, greater exposure to visual images, increased freedom of action and greater social understanding cannot of themselves provide a solution to the problem of how we educate adolescents and help them to grow into free individuals who are emotionally developed and sexually balanced.

Adolescents are subjected to a barrage of information, models, stimuli and products, but what they lack are spaces where they can consider and analyse their experiences, assimilate them and learn how to share with others.

The issues which lie at the heart of our closest relationships, such as the enjoyment of sexuality, are often subject to double standards and are understood in incomplete or contradictory ways. We are concerned about pregnancy and abortion among adolescents, their risky behaviour, the use of a range of drugs at younger and younger ages, new addictions to the internet and mobile phones, the way they express their feelings, etc. But within our political, social and professional institutions we find it hard to develop a response to young people's needs which is based on a broad, multidisciplinary perspective.

It is curious, in the light of this social situation, that we devote so much energy to discussing the importance of emotional and sexual education

from a general perspective without addressing the difficulties within the family context, and nor do we take an integrated approach across the school system.

There are studies showing that integrated emotional and sexual education can promote respect for others, delay the start of sexual activity, reduce the frequency of unprotected penetrative sex, reduce the number of sexual partners and increase the use of safe contraceptives.

Talking naturally about sexuality in an objective, positive manner also brings in closely related issues such as drugs and infection with HIV/AIDS in a relaxed, educational manner.

A brief history of emotional and sexual education in Spain

To begin with a bit of history, in November 1976, issue 10 of the journal *Perspectiva Escolar*, published by the Rosa Sensat Foundation, contained a paper on “Sexual education”. According to its authors, the aim was to shake people out of their complacency, challenge prejudices, taboos and unfounded beliefs, and rid teachers of their fear of addressing the sexuality and pleasure of young people (and their own!), encouraging teachers to undertake thorough, well-grounded work designed to help young people discover the joy of living and communicating with others.

In 1981, Catalonia developed the first project in Spain for a programme for “Health education in schools”. This proposal was produced by professionals working in the fields of health and education, who argued for the need for coordinated work between health and teaching professionals, and concluded that there was a need for educational and preventive work starting during early childhood.

In 1990, the new education bill (the LOGSE), incorporated a number of “integrated themes”, including emotional and sexual education.

It has long been accepted that the emotional and sexual changes we experience in adolescence have an effect on our general development. In this

context, understanding sexuality as an essential part of the development process and of our emotional balance is in itself a justification of the need to include this subject in the design of curriculums.

It therefore makes sense to recognize emotional and sexual education as central to the personal and social development of adolescents, and therefore as an issue which must be addressed within schools.

A few years ago a number of proposals were published suggesting an approach to secondary education based on variable credits. As a result, some centres began to address emotional and sexual education with students in the third or fourth year of secondary education, for one term, with three weekly sessions in smaller groups.

Recently, the variable element of the curriculum, which has been the main vehicle for addressing this topic in formal education, has been reduced to a minimum, at the same time as schools have been asked to address an ever increasing number of social issues.

Today, with the latest Spanish education act (LOE, 2006), which suppresses variable credits, we have lost the space where these “integrated” subjects can be addressed in a systematic manner. As a result, we have returned to a reductionist, atomized model, based on occasional “workshops” held as part of general class, usually with the contribution of external specialists. These workshops primarily address issues such as risk or the correct use of condoms, neglecting topics such as concerns, fears and the emotional impact of new fantasies and the adolescent’s first shared relationships, which are so strongly related to attitudes and behaviour during this period of growth.

When considering sexual education, we must start by reflecting upon the meaning of sexuality.

2. Sexuality

We need to start by defining what we mean by sexuality. There are two key elements: firstly, that we are sexual beings from birth, and secondly that sexually is totally subjective. Even so, sexuality, like love and other intrinsically subjective concepts, is far from easy to define. Where should we set the limits?

According to Dr. Pere Folch Mateu, a highly regarded psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, sexuality in the broadest sense – including love, emotion, physicality, discovery, the search for pleasure – is what leads us to establish relationships with others, and to communicate with them. It accompanies us throughout our lives, we feel it, we experience it, but we often find it difficult to talk about.

Although it is very hard to provide a precise definition of sexuality, the version offered by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1975 brings together some of the essential elements: “Sexuality is an energy which motivates us to seek affection, contact, pleasure, tenderness and intimacy. Sexuality is related to the body, but it influences our thoughts, feelings, emotions, actions and interactions and, therefore, has an influence on our physical and mental health.” This definition refers to a vital energy which, as a result of personal characteristics and fantasies, experiences and messages, is constructed on an individual basis.

In the light of this description of sexuality, many of the sexual practices of adolescents lead us to reflect upon their search for affection, identity and recognition when these are missing in their home environment or they suffer from social deprivation or disadvantage.

The diverse and all-encompassing nature of sexuality mean that as individuals we need first to understand ourselves fully, and this requires that sexuality develops as a cognitive, reflective and integrative process.

At present, international organizations use the expression “sexual and reproductive health” as an umbrella term for everything which forms part of our emotional, sexual and reproductive relationships.

Part of an ongoing process which starts at birth

As sexual beings from birth, we know that our sexuality begins to develop from the moment of our birth and even earlier, with our parents’ wish to conceive. Something which is so natural should be incorporated into our lives in a natural manner, not as an addition only after we have reached a certain age.

We know that we establish a bond with babies through care, feeding, stroking and physical contact, words and tone of voice, and this fills the baby with affection and sensations and, therefore, with sexual energy. We now know that neuronal memory is sensitive to affection and that, as sexual beings, this is a key element of our relationships with others.

Our gender – either male or female – develops from conception, as a consequence of our sexual nature. However, how we develop and behave is then formed by our individual characteristics, the impact of different experiences and our own subjectivity. In the early stages, family and social roles ensure that the baby’s life is full of emotional experiences which will become part of that individual’s baggage.

This perspective sees sexuality and its expression as a continuum from birth; it is a process which accompanies growth, which is formed and expressed in the context of the most intimate relationships, the knowledge which each individual acquires, the affection he or she receives, the emotions and sensations which are aroused, and the different experiences of the individual, among others. It is also clear that during adolescence, with the maturation of secondary sexual characteristics, all the experiences internalized during the individual’s development emerge with great force, and the “desire” to share one’s sexuality and choose who to share it with is expressed and takes form.

As we have already noted, the individual’s sexuality has been developing since he or she was born, and this means that by the time they reach adolescence their sexuality is already partly formed. Moreover, the adolescent’s behaviour, his or her attitudes and many of the situations he or she will experience and which will be reflected in the expression of his or her sexuality, are closely related to earlier experiences. For this reason, during the extremely

important stage of development known as adolescence, it is essential that we address both emotional and sexual development in the broadest sense, both physically and emotionally.

Although adolescence is the stage when our awareness of our sex and of our sexual energy is clearest and most intense, passionate, and overwhelming, after this stage we continue to be aware of our bodies and to feel a need for the pleasures of contact and the emotional affection which we derive from this, even if its intensity is not so great.

At the same time, humans are cultural beings. As a result, the immediate social environment and the values and beliefs which surround the individual (family, school, religion, culture of country of origin, political, legal etc.) have a considerable influence on the development and expression of that person's sexuality throughout his or her life. Both boys and girls, as they develop and mature, assimilate values and attitudes which form how they understand, experience and share their sexuality.

There are many factors, both internal and external, which influence the development of a sexual being within a cultural context: affection, learning, experience, relationships with others, self-esteem, love, relationships with peers, respect, intimacy, empathy, knowledge and acceptance of one's own body, a capacity for critical thought, problem-solving, personal sensitivity, ability to tolerate frustration, and many more, depending on the family, country and culture which have surrounded us.

The importance of contact and care

The importance of the first *emotional bond* with our sexual bodies is a reflection of the role of the attitude and care of our parents or first adult carers in shaping our personality and, therefore, our sexual identity.

The first stimuli to our emotions involve both physical pleasure and emotional development. For example, there is a world of difference between the experience of a child who is looked after by a mother who strokes him, breastfeeds him, bathes him, gives him a massage – in short, someone who

stimulates his sexual aspect in an affectionate, stable way – and the experience of a child who is neglected or ignored as a result of the personal problems of the carer or family. All of this creates the child's "baggage" consisting of his or her experiences in this area, which provide the basis for the attitudes and behaviours of the adult he or she will one day become.

For this reason, we believe that genuine emotional and sexual education should start in childhood, where we need to transmit and constantly reaffirm the importance of contact with those around us, through expressions, words, touching, looking, smiles etc.

When adolescence occurs, structural changes occur, both physiological and psychological and social. This is a stage characterized by the maturation of secondary sexual characteristics, with changes to the body image and sensations and feelings which feel like a challenge and which the individual is often unable to cope with. The physiological changes do not occur at the same rate as psychological and emotional changes, and some physical sensations, together with sexual fantasies, lead adolescents to engage in sexual activity at a very early age and to confront risks with which they are not yet familiar.

At such times, the adolescent may reject the attentions of childhood, but more than ever adolescents need adults to notice them and listen to them, to accompany them, and to be sensitive to what they are going through. It is a time of experimentation, of feeling and assimilating new sensations and emotions, even if these are difficult to cope with. If they receive support and have someone who will listen to them at difficult times when they may be suffering, this will help them to learn from their experiences and to grow and change.

We have seen that sexuality is closely linked to the care that children receive from the very start of their lives. How they have been cared for, what notion of caring for others and caring for oneself they acquire within the family, how they have felt protected at different moments in their lives: all of this equates to a greater or lesser degree of emotional balance and is reflected in how the individual behaves in relation to others.

Often, psychologists and other professional experts deal with young people who have been neglected and have not learnt to look after themselves because of serious shortcomings in their upbringing. In this sort of situation, the route to developing one's identity is complicated and relationships are often unsatisfying; as a result, the individual is likely to be vulnerable and repeatedly engage in more risky behaviour. The emotional and sexual aspects become disconnected. The situation becomes yet more complicated when the adolescents have been "abandoned" early in life and, as a result of family reorganization, arrive in Spain with a different set of cultural and experiential baggage. This requires another potentially painful separation, as the individual attempts to integrate into the world of school and find a community or peer group which enables the adolescent to construct or reaffirm his or her identity.

3. Setting boundaries

Educational experts say that educating always involves showing something. And this means getting your hands dirty, getting involved. It is not possible to transmit knowledge or information without content or as an imposition.

However, the task of education also involves setting boundaries, which help to enable genuine individual identity and freedom. It is not easy, but children and adolescents expect their educators (family, teacher, health professional, etc.) to tell them how far they can go, what they can and cannot do, why they should behave in one way or another, etc. The relationship between tutor and adolescent is not one of equality, but is instead necessarily asymmetrical. Otherwise, the tutor would cease to be an educator and would become simply another peer. This is also the case with regard to sexuality and emotional development. Learning to respect others is something which happens primarily in the home, but which also takes place in the classroom.

The basic limits on sexuality and its expression derive from human rights and ethical principles. In shared sexuality, anything is permitted so long as respect for the freedom of the other person is ensured and there is no coercion. If we establish a generic notion of sexuality we inevitably stifle the sexual expression of the individual. In sexuality, as for other aspects of life, not everything is possible, and being human means precisely accepting certain limits. In this context, each society imposes certain limits and values, and children must be socialized so that they come to share the limits and values of the society in which they live.

However, to reaffirm one's personality and test what one feels, during this period of change individuals need to try out their capacities, to "transgress" the limits imposed upon them and to test how far they can go. Experimentation and the right to make mistakes play a central role in the process of acquiring and assimilating knowledge. Much of this behaviour, engaged in to test one's emotions and feelings and to explore new experiences, goes beyond the boundaries of safety and comfort. In this context, the tutor must be aware of the importance of such boundaries as the basis of the adolescent's ability to live with others and find his or her place in the world.

We need to accept both that we are unique individuals and that we live in a community with certain limits, rules and principles which we need to understand and respect if we are to grow within the community. And this is why we need education in values and, in particular, in emotional and sexual matters, in a world where sexuality has become more than just the natural basis for our relationships.

How to transmit these complex yet essential messages to society, to families, to those in charge of schools and, above all, to children, adolescents and young people themselves, as part of their education, is a challenge which has not yet been fully resolved.

4. Education and sexuality

As Joan Brossa so rightly noted, “we learn important things, but they cannot be taught.” However, it is also true that learning forms a key part of our education and upbringing from birth, and this raises the question of how sexuality should be taught.

Emotional and sexual education is a process which should start in the first years of our existence and continue throughout our lives. This process involves both family and schools and, at other times, other experts or influential adults.

The role of the family

The family plays a key role, because it provides a model of behaviour, in particular with regard to interpersonal and emotional relationships, and the way in which we understand and apply the roles associated with each sex.

But perhaps adolescence is not the moment at which parents should start talking about sexuality with their children. Before we get to that point, there are a number of issues which should be addressed from infancy: values, respect, tenderness, showing affection, etc.

When the issue of sexuality arises in the home, particularly with regard to the body and pleasure, many parents think this is something to be discussed only when the child is old enough. But what is the right moment? Should we wait until children reach adolescence and begin to share their sexuality or have already had their first experiences, involving a greater or lesser degree of risk?

Parents often feel confused when faced with the different expressions of sexuality in their offspring: playing at doctors and nurses to explore their genitals, discovering the body and feelings of pleasure when they touch their genitals, curiosity with regard to their parents' bodies, reactions of pleasure when being stroked or washed, etc. There is concern as to what is and isn't okay, and which behaviours can be considered normal.

At the same time, children's questions about sexuality often provoke surprise or embarrassment. Parents feel ill-prepared to answer them, and even when they know what they want to say, they don't know how to say it. There will always be anxiety, doubts and different opinions about the sexual education of children, given that this largely depends on how we have experienced our own sexuality.

Some believe that telling young people the truth or providing information about sexuality may awaken their curiosity or encourage the premature development of their sexuality. However, this is not borne out by the evidence. "Knowledge" is a source of tranquillity and helps us to identify sexual reality and its limits.

Ignorance and denial make us vulnerable; in contrast, knowledge and understanding enable us to assess situations, to anticipate risks, and to take measures to prevent them. We need to prepare people to deal with risks by providing them with knowledge and developing their ability to make decisions.

Most parents are, anyway, well aware of the need for sexual education which is clear, positive, and appropriate to the child's age and developmental stage. This means treating issues in as natural and normal a way as possible.

We need to seek to address the issues relating to how sexuality is expressed at different developmental stages. We also need to take a natural approach to the different ways of expressing sexuality, including sexual intercourse and how to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, making young people aware of preventative measures (such as male and female condoms or other contraceptives). Young people's health is at stake.

When information is received at home in a natural manner it is assimilated more quickly, helping young people to take ethical decisions, and laying the foundations for a critical capacity and the ability to manage risk.

If we accept that the family is one of the main sources of education about the emotions and sexuality, we also need to recognize that sometimes parents need help, that central as they are to this process, they often do not know

what to do. Nor do they necessarily know who to turn to for the advice and help they need to address these and other issues with their children.

The role of schools

Throughout infant and primary education, schools play a vital role in the education of children, and this puts them in a position to address attitudes, emotional development, non-discriminatory roles and basic information about sexuality.

In secondary education, which coincides with a particular stage in psycho-sexual development, emotional and sexual education become absolutely essential. For the adolescent this is an essential time to have access to information and guidance, and the family is not always able to provide this.

If the emotions are what make us human, what drive us to form relationships with others, and are the basis of a balanced life, then it is surely desirable for sexual education in schools to pay more attention to emotional issues and to the different ways of relating to others and of behaving, rather than merely consisting of information about reproductive biology, contraception, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexual education has an undeniable ethical component, and one of the tasks of educators is precisely that of helping young people to create their own ethical code enabling them to enjoy their rights, to respect the rights of others, and to develop healthier, more responsible attitudes and behaviours with regard to their own sexuality.

When young people are educated as whole people, without separating sexual education from personal education, this has a positive impact on their sexual education.

An early programme for a "summer school" on sexual education already talked about the need for educators to introduce the issue of sexuality into their teaching as part of a more general focus on personal growth. The aim was to locate sexuality and the emotions within a context of personal growth

and development. This would require placing emotional and sexual education within the conceptual framework of health education in the broadest and most positive sense, including the emotions which help us to grow and mature, recognition of the risks this entails, and addressing how best to manage these.

Participatory workshops, either mixed or single sex, to address specific practical aspects of sexuality, and tailored to fit the developmental stage of participants, can be positive, but only if they are set in the wider context of health and development.

At the same time, while education is clearly necessary, we also need to recognize that there are some issues which are very difficult to teach in the ways which adults would like; indeed, not everything can be taught. However much young people have been taught about the meaning and importance of sexuality, whether by their families or by schools, and even if they live in a positive and enriching social environment with friendships and relationships which exercise a healthy influence, the most intimate aspects of sexuality, and the emotions and feelings which this generates when it is shared also derive from the personal characteristics, fantasies and experiences of each individual. As a result, there are always choices to be made, and each individual will feel and experience their sexuality in their own way.

There are many elements which contribute to the expression of a person's sexuality: their need for affection, their capacity for independence, the role they ascribe to others, the expectations they have of their relationships, what they want, what they need from others, what they ask for, etc. And this new emotional state may make it difficult for the individual to manage and take responsibility for his or her situation.

Often, when adolescents seek advice after experiencing a situation of risk, their questions run a whole gamut of sensations which they find it difficult to express in words. And this must also be addressed in emotional and sexual education.

The right to sexuality education is based on a definition offered by experts in sexual rights: "The rights of all individuals, free of coercion, discrimina-

tion or violence: to the highest possible level of sexual health (including access to sexual and reproductive health services); to search for, receive and transmit information relating to sexuality; to education about sexuality; to respect for physical integrity; to the choice of a partner; to the decision to be sexually active or not; to consensual sexual relations; to the decision as to whether and when to have children; and to enjoy a satisfactory, safe, pleasurable sex life."

Information and education, including sexual education, are both a necessity and a right, incorporated as such in various international agreements and conventions (the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development).

Stereotypes about emotional expression and sexuality

When delivering sexual education, there is a danger of unwittingly falling into stereotypes about sexuality and love. This is of little educational value, and it may even be dangerous to offer up as fact preconceived ideas drawn from social practice which are adopted unconsciously.

Feminism has had a major influence in raising awareness of the sexist and patriarchal nature of society, and in identifying issues which have a negative impact on women, and it is natural that we respond to this by ensuring that we are sensitive to the social, personal and sexual needs of girls. However, it is important that we do not go too far in the other direction and ignore the problems and concerns of boys, who are also victims of a sexist education which they do not benefit from. We need to stress the importance of listening and observing (non-verbal communication), and above all it is essential that we encourage girls and boys to talk, to "listen more, to express themselves and to give space to others".

Sexual education needs to be more human and less stereotyped. Men need to be able to cry if necessary, and women must be able to take the initiative.

5. Communication and gender

Emotional and sexual education, as a fundamental element in the process of change and growth, should improve communication and relationships with others, including respecting differences in the widest sense.

The differences between boys and girls in the process of the psychological and social construction of masculinity and femininity can already be seen in the way children behave and relate to each other during childhood, but during adolescence this is expressed more clearly through fantasies, expectations and emotions with regard to sexuality and, in particular, the way in which the first shared sexual relations are experienced.

These expectations, emotions and feelings with regard to emotional and sexual relations among boys and girls vary widely, and every individual follows a different path towards psychosexual identity. We need to find spaces for communication and exchange which allow us to consider the differences between boys and girls on the basis of mutual respect.

Emotional and sexual education in adolescence must include the dimension of personal relations, and enable adolescents (boys and girls together) to talk, communicate and share with each other their doubts, fears, what they think and feel with regard to sexuality, to learn to talk freely and without inhibition, to understand and respect others. It would also be good if this shared space helped them to understand and, therefore, to address some of the negative ideas received from family and society.

In group-based work it is sometimes helpful for doubts, questions and considerations about sexuality to be raised in small, single-sex groups. This allows both boys and girls to express themselves more freely. It is then important for there to be a mixed-sex discussion of what the single-sex groups have discussed or agreed.

This mixed discussion is very interesting, and it means that boys and girls have to create and sustain a working relationship. If they don't agree with the models they are given, this is something they can discuss and learn about together.

When schools take gender differences as the starting point for working towards equality across the educational process, then it is easier to think about and discuss sexuality and the emotions and this can be done in mixed groups from the start.

Schools should be not just mixed but coeducational, something which is often not the case. The difference between a coeducational school and one which is simply mixed is that coeducational schools tackle discrimination between men and women with the aim of combating inequality and unfairness. The principles of equality must be addressed from the perspective of personal and social differences between boys and girls, promoting communication, understanding and mutual respect.

Promoting communication

As educators we need to promote more discussion of sex and love between young people so that they can listen to and appreciate different points of view, talking about falling in love, the ideals we have about relationships, and how these ideals are by definition impossible to achieve.

For a long time, the practice was to teach courses on emotional and sexual education, and it became clear when working with boys and girls that when discussing these issues very little was said about sexuality, and instead the focus was on "what we are like", how we relate to each other, and how we feel at different moments. Perhaps this is what is most interesting: talking about how I relate to myself, to others, my fears, failings and the meaning of emotional relationships. If you achieve this communication, you will find that it enables you to make a lot of progress in everything you do with students, not just with regard to emotional and sexual issues, but also by improving individual self-esteem and well-being and group relationships. As a result, they take more interest in what is being taught and are more prepared to do maths or other subjects, because they feel more at ease and their relationships both with other students and with their teachers are more positive.

As teachers, in addition to delivering the content we also need to help students to communicate, to anticipate the situations they may face as part of their personal relationships with peers and partners, and to consider different perspectives and approaches depending both on gender and on each individual's personal characteristics.

6. Adolescence and risk

Experts recognize that overtly or potentially risky behaviour is a feature of the adolescent personality. Often, overcoming risk is a challenge which involves transgressing and testing oneself to find one's own limits as part of a growth in autonomy. Experiencing this risk is, therefore, a part of adolescence, involving not just danger but also the pleasure of acting or thinking differently from adults.

If transgressing is part of adolescence, so too are boundaries, and this means that adults (family, school, community, etc.) have to provide these boundaries so that adolescents may transgress them. New experiences and risky behaviours, so to speak, must make parents suffer because this is part of the intergenerational dynamic. However, there is a profile of young person who becomes fixated with risky behaviour. These young people are observed by professionals to have conflictual relationships in almost every area of their lives. In other words, they are young people with problems, and they tend to engage in conflicts with regard to sex, drugs, violence, etc. It is therefore important to try to identify this tendency early in order to be able to offer help.

However, it is also important that the sexuality of young people in general is not understood solely as a matter of exposure to risk and the testing of boundaries. Emotional and sexual education should seek to transmit the notion that sexuality is positive, with an emphasis on pleasure, enjoyment, sharing and respect for others. These positive elements of sexuality and shared relationships are vitally important, and also provide a basis for discussing risk in a more straightforward manner.

We need to create an educational pathway which enables us and young people to talk about their emotions, respect, fantasies, desires, fears, doubts, pleasures and satisfactions, from a positive perspective, to help them to build a high level of self-esteem and self-confidence.

As a result, we need to find a way of helping young people – whether in their maths, physics, literature or other classes – to increase their ability to think,

analyse and predict the potential consequences of their actions. The aim is to help them to develop their ethical and human judgement and to enable them to know where they are, what they want, what risks they are assuming, what problems this could entail and the potential consequences. And finally, everyone should be empowered to make their own choices.

Especially vulnerable young people

When adults provide weak guidance or are not up to the task of accompanying adolescents and understanding the process of growth, then it becomes more difficult for adolescents and young people, and their behaviour can be a form of acting out which crosses over the boundaries of rebellion and puts the young person's health at risk.

If, on this journey of personal growth, family and social support are lacking, then the young person may, depending on their personality, behave in an unrestrained manner, adopting dangerous habits, or become inhibited and dependent on fringe groups, or be seduced by the power of violence and suffer from emotional or mental disorders.

In fact, in behaviour which develops as a reaction to unhappiness with one's immediate environment, there is no awareness of risk. The aim is to attract attention and find a means of identification, in short to be noticed, whatever the cost.

Boys and girls who live in disadvantaged family and social circumstances are more likely to engage in high risk behaviours. At the same time, adolescents may experience situations such as their parents getting divorced, the death of friends or relatives, mistreatment, abuse, etc. which may lead to occasional or more frequent relationships with problematic peer groups or to contradictory and unhealthy behaviour, which often makes the young person unhappy but which he or she is unable to avoid.

In this context, education can help to improve the young person's emotional state, and to understand their behaviour as a way of presenting an image and seeking attention. The young person may be able to overcome this stage of

constantly indulging in risky behaviour independently, but if he or she does not yet have this level of self-control then specialist, individualized help may be required. In this case, the school also has an important role to play.

These are very vulnerable young people, whose vulnerability is the result of emotional deprivation. This can usually be observed throughout their childhoods, and affects their relationships with themselves and with others.

Isn't a degree of fear positive? Aristotle argued that fear was a passion which, if properly controlled, could be useful on the right occasion. For the teacher, teaching means showing people how to control their emotions and the anxieties which these give rise to. In other words, teaching people to be angry when they should be angry, and to be afraid when they should be afraid. The aim is to channel emotions appropriately.

We strongly believe that this is positive. The aim is not to avoid problems and say, "No, that will scare people." Instead, we seek to help people understand that doubts and fear are part of the human condition, and that we require knowledge, understanding and skill to cope with them.

Often, with regard to sexual practices and transgression, it has been shown that fear generates greater desire and powerlessness. It is important to help the young person to connect with reality, to help them to decide whether or not they are ready for sexual relationships or whether they need more time before they feel prepared.

Sexuality is a source of pleasure, but a pleasure which is misused can cause suffering and even lead to mental health problems. In other words, any pleasure can become a disorder or an addiction. This is a very complex issue which can be related to education and culture but also to the individual's own emotional problems or predispositions.

A lot has been said about the cult of the image, but often when you work with adolescents on an ongoing basis you realize that it is really just a shell, and that when you look beneath you can find a person with needs and shortcomings, suffering from loneliness, and that their outward appearance is really their "armour".

A lot has also been said about adolescents who are weak, vulnerable and deprived. But the reality is that many education centres (primary and secondary schools, etc.) lack spaces where adolescents are listened to and supported properly.

Nor are they necessarily listened to by their families, with the result that by the time they come into contact with professional services they often display conflictive behaviour or deep-rooted disorders which are difficult to address.

We need to strive to predict the needs and deprivations of these individuals during their childhood, before conflict and risky behaviour become their only way of relating to their peers, to society and to life.

In this respect, emotional and sexual education, as advocated at this discussion day, understood as a global process which includes both physical health and education to support emotional well-being, can be of help to the most vulnerable young people.

7. The impact of social change

Today's "globalized" society and new communication technologies are an almost limitless source both of information and of pressure on young people to increase their "consumption", transmitting messages which often encourage young people to grow up too fast. As we have noted throughout this paper, we know that all changes need time if they are to be assimilated, and this is even more the case in the period of growth which is adolescence, when these changes tend to be experienced with fear and suffering, where there should be a space both for grieving for one's lost childhood and for euphoria at new conquests.

At the same time, contact and relationships with young people from other cultures have revealed old and new ways of dealing with these challenges. Often, the most vulnerable adolescents and those at greatest social risk, above all girls, feel seduced and may suffer the consequences.

There is a real contradiction between what experts observe and recognize as significant threats to young people's health and the widespread permissiveness which is manifested in many messages, images, leisure opportunities and incitements to consume to which these young people are exposed so frequently. For example, drugs reflect a market dynamic (ease of purchase, major benefits, impunity, etc.) and sexuality, including advertising, is treated in a banal and decontextualized way, stripped of its intimacy and often taking on an aggressive form. These are realities which are discussed in newspapers and academic papers but which are difficult to address through social and educational policies.

With regard to the internet, we need to accept that it exists and that it is futile to oppose it. When parents express concern about the number of hours their children spend in front of a computer and about the dangers they may encounter when surfing the internet, they may be right, but the disappearance of computers is neither possible nor desirable, and nor can we go against progress. It is important to help children to use the internet properly, just as we should with children who spend too much time watching cartoons

on TV. In this new world of global education, it is essential that we help adolescents understand what the internet is, what information is helpful and useful, and what is not.

Most of the sexual information received by children and young people today comes from the TV, magazines and the audiovisual media: cinema, internet, video games, etc. This information is chaotic, and one of the functions of education is to impose order on information, to analyse it and to explain why not everything we see and read is equally valid.

Another feature of today's society is that adolescents sometimes lack their own space for trying things out and having a relationship with their partner, to enjoy their privacy or seek the limelight, because their mothers and fathers are also embarking upon new relationships, and they therefore find themselves in competition with them. How often as professionals have we dealt with a pregnancy which is a "symptom" of a situation of conflict or is an unconscious complaint and a cry for attention?

However, it is also the case that the school often has to make up for the shortcomings of the family. The school must offer equal opportunities. If the adolescent has parents who do not love each other, who set a bad example, who compete with or neglect the young person, the school must try to make up for this, as far as possible.

From a health service perspective, we have seen dramatic changes in the population and how it behaves. Part of this new adult society has other values or different values, which undoubtedly have an impact, and not always a positive one, on the emotional and sexual experiences of young people. Among these changes is the fact that sexuality and sexual activity are too often the object of consumption, in which the focus is on genital stimulation, instant pleasure and narcissism, when sexuality, as we understand it, should not be commercialized. And we have already seen how this frivolous approach to sexual activity, in which "anything goes", often leads to identity crises and personality disorders which require help.

At the same time, teacher training is full of shortcomings which need to be addressed. If we are to educate people in values, then who will teach future

teachers how to do this, and where is the training to provide moral education? Teacher training departments do not usually address the key issues for coeducation, identifying the objective and subjective aspects of differences between girls and boys and explaining how to work on the basis of respect for and understanding of these differences. As a result, it is extremely difficult to take an integrated approach to emotional and sexual education.

8. Conclusions

To start with, if the different institutions showed a little more courage in raising these issues with families and society as a whole then this could help to open up a dialogue to raise awareness of the issues and enable discussion of them. There need to be closer links between these social institutions and above all between schools and families.

With regard to interpersonal relations, communication, attitudes, behaviour and sexuality, experience shows that group discussion and analysis (by adolescents, parents, professionals, health service user groups, patients, etc.) helps those involved to identify and think about their own difficulties, concerns, beliefs, attitudes, behaviour, misconceptions etc.

With respect to emotional and sexual education and group work, a few basic considerations – such as, for example, providing clear, coherent information, a direct message, respect for the contributions of others, and valuing dialogue and communication as a way of intervening – make it possible to work with adolescents and young people and help them to develop a critical yet respectful attitude to the world around them.

In the educational sphere, there is ample recognition of the importance of learning from group work to which everyone participates. With respect to adolescents and young people, if we wish to resolve the fears, doubts, contradictions, misconceptions and behaviours which cause them suffering, and to develop their ability to recognize and deal with risk, we need to accept the importance of coeducational emotional and sexual education, exploring gender differences and mutual respect.

All of these issues can be addressed in schools in an integrated manner, drawing on different topics within the curriculum or in tutorial groups, using attractive tools which promote participation, such as dramatization, role play, hypothetical examples, comic strips, cards with frequent questions, photos, videos, excerpts from films, etc. This type of health education, adapting tools and content in accordance with the developmental stage, can be used with primary or secondary pupils and for groups with special needs.

It is also important to conduct specific prevention and health promotion activities in schools, and in places where young people spend their leisure time, to encourage them to think about their attitudes and the consequences of risky behaviour. The aim is to bring health promotion specialists into the young person's setting, so that young people see them as someone to turn to for help, if needed.

Sexual information and education is a right which is recognized in the Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and by the World Health Organization (WHO). However, we do not yet have a coherent, integrated sexual education programme which is universal, evolving, sensitive to gender issues, free of prejudice and stereotypes, objective, critical and pluralistic, and based on a positive approach to sexuality, emotional relations, love and personal relations.

Working group

- Quim Cabra, secondary school teacher and educationalist.
- Victòria Camps, president of the Víctor Grífols i Lucas Foundation.
- Enriqueta Díaz, teacher at Arnau Cadell Secondary School in Sant Cugat del Vallès.
- Sílvia Egea, clinical psychologist.
- Isabel Ferré, doctor at the Sexual and Reproductive Care Centre (CASSIR) of Badalona.
- Carme García, teacher at Menéndez Pidal Secondary School.
- Sílvia López, psychologist with the Sexual and Reproductive Care Centre (SASSIR) of the Catalan Health Institute (ICS).
- Maria Rosa Ribas, nurse and writer.
- Rosa Ros, working group coordinator and director of the Young People's Centre for Contraception and Sexuality (CJAS).
- Pilar Serón, clinical psychologist.

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