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Sextension?

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Sextension?

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Abstract: *Many programs in Extension deal with sensitive issues; however, one issue that seems to be comfortably omitted is sexuality education. How can Extension address this issue? This article highlights existing sensitive issues already addressed in Extension programs and offers a challenge to examine the situation for the benefit of individuals, families and communities.*

One thing Extension does well is bring people together for collaboration on programs that benefit the community. More often than not, these programs are in response to some issue facing families, farmers, or youth.

Sensitive Issues in Extension

For many people, talking about money is a very private thing. I have conducted estate planning and budgeting classes providing information to help individuals and families make knowledgeable choices about how to save, spend, or invest their money.

Breastfeeding can be seen as a private matter, and yet Extension has been involved in providing information to help parents make informed decisions on whether or not and *how* to nurse their children.

Nutrition and parenting are examples of other topics about which Extension has developed materials and implemented programs—not to dictate to people the foods or discipline methods they *have* to eat or use, but rather to assist in making more informed decisions.

Purpose of Programming, 4-H in Particular

Youth programs have the mission of developing leaders or, as McGrath, Conway, and Johnson (2007) say, "in part, to improve the success of young people in school so they will have access and desire to engage in higher education."

Each "h" in 4-H represents an educational concept: head, heart, hands, and health.

We strive to help youth make better decisions in their *heads*, help empower them to lead others, and to speak publicly and knowledgeably about a variety of topics. We strive to help youth understand in their *heart* the concept of community service, doing for others, and giving back with their *hands*. We educate about livestock, the *health* of animals, and proper breeding or animal husbandry topics. We even educate about Internet safety, bullying, and other "safe" *health* topics.

But where are our efforts to help youth to understand about the *health* and development of their own bodies, otherwise known as sex education?

Sex Education

Current Efforts

I have piloted a few hygiene and basic personal development classes with parental consent. The most obvious issue raised is sexual activity and teen pregnancy, but that's not exactly what I'm talking about. At what point can we help parents talk about a variety of issues with their own children? Conversely, can we help youth to approach the issues with their parents?

Family Challenges

I understand and support the perspective that sex education should happen in the home. However, many parents are ill prepared to discuss the plethora of issues facing youth today. Even more so, parents are opposed to discussing a select few issues, when in reality discussion can only help tease out the confusion for both.

Many families are facing multiple issues Sauer (1990) cites earlier as being the primary cause of some secondary symptoms of society—poverty, lack of family support, negative peer pressure, and sometimes neighborhood, color skin, ethnic background, and language barriers.

Existing Resources

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) has generated a publication, *Developing Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education* (1999). The document describes how to bring folks together to address the issue, a skill that Extension has well refined and in most communities is well prepared to use. But rather than recreate the wheel when it comes to developing guidelines, SIECUS has produced another publication, *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten Through 12th Grade* (2004), in its third edition.

Now before you begin the dancing eyebrows of disagreement and angrily say to yourself (but wish you could say to me), "what do kindergarteners need to know about sex education?" The key concepts and topics for children ages 5-8 include developmental messages such as the following.

- Each body part has a correct name and specific function.
- A person's genitals, reproductive organs, and genes determine whether a person is male or female. (SIECUS, 2004, p.25)

These messages fall in line with explanations of why mommy and daddy go to different bathrooms in public. All in all, the messages are designed to be developmentally appropriate for each of four levels and cover six concepts as follows.

LEVELS (SIECUS, 2004, p.17)

1. Middle childhood, ages 5 through 8; early elementary school
2. Preadolescence, ages 9 through 12; upper elementary school
3. Early adolescence, ages 12 through 15; middle school/junior high school
4. Adolescence, ages 15 through 18; high school

KEY CONCEPTS (SIECUS, 2004, p. 15)

1. Human Development
2. Relationships
3. Personal Skills
4. Sexual Behavior
5. Sexual Health
6. Society and Culture

Not for Everyone

Granted, the key concepts and topics outlined in *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education* (2004) are not topics that every Extension agent either is comfortable with or should be teaching. However, for those who are ready and willing to further assist in healthy development and decision making of individuals and families, I highly recommend examining your situation. You may be surprised to find that your community is looking for help and does not know where to go.

What Parents Think

A 1994 article (Welshimer & Harris) surveying attitudes of rural parents toward sexuality education found the primary concerns were "not whether it *should* be taught, but the contact time, teacher preparation, grade levels, and course content." Other findings include "while parents prefer to be their children's primary sexuality educators, they are insecure about their ability to do so, and their knowledge base is often inaccurate."

The article also mentions that, while controversy is likely, it is important to keep everyone focused on the common ground and not the differences. Similarly, a parenting program can be held while opinions on spanking can be left to the individuals.

Conclusion

Are you ready and willing to share how you have been helping individuals and families when it comes to sexual health? I have found searches in the *Journal of Extension* to be very limited in this area. Maybe you *are* doing something or have strong opinions either in support for or against assisting families in this way. If so, I would like to hear your voice.

I'll leave you with this thought—how do families cope with normal growth and development of their child into an adult? Now think about this, how do families cope when the growth and development of their child into an adult isn't "normal"? I believe Extension can help!

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