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Tools for teaching healthy sexuality

by Thomas C. Fox



Coco McAfee (NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Coco McAtee works with children and parents, teaching human sexuality with an aim to instill confidence in parents' ability to educate their children and improve their family communication. A licensed clinical social worker based in Overland Park, Kan., McAtee is a mother of two and has been married for over 15 years. She brings her own Catholic roots and family experiences into her classes, which she gives in various interfaith settings in the Kansas City, Mo., area. This educator explains that parents who teach healthy sexuality should continue to have age-appropriate conversations with children in an open, honest and respectful manner. NCR editor Tom Fox recently interviewed McAtee about her work.

NCR: Are most parents comfortable speaking with their children about matters of sexuality?

Coco McAtee: Actually, no. Most parents get involved in my classes because they don't have the tools or language to talk to their children about these matters and they are looking for help.

How do you begin talking about sexuality from a Christian perspective?

I frequently begin with Genesis. I say that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that our bodies are good. Once God finished with every material thing, it was declared good. Once humans were

made, we were declared very good. All of who we are -- genitals and all. I speak of the Trinity. I develop ideas on human sexuality in the context of a relational image. It's about being connected to self, to one another, to God. As scripture says, "Let us make them in our image." Emphasis on *us*. So from the get-go, I offer a sense that healthy sexuality is about healthy relationships. It's always more than having a genital focus, which is where the vast majority of us stay stuck.

Elaborate, please.

I say that our bodies are designed by God, touched by God, created by God, and they are a truly wonderful thing. Every single body part. I go on to say that Jesus came into the world with a body. He didn't come solely as spirit. He came with a body. This is a blessing to us all. Jesus' bodily presence is saying that our bodies are so valuable he took on this form. So my approach to talking to parents and children is to stress, or in some cases, reclaim, the beauty and sacredness of their bodies. That's the starting point.

So what did Jesus say about sexuality?

Well, a lot of folks will simply remember that he was a celibate. However, when I consider the parables I talk about the way Jesus taught respect for everyone with whom he interacted. He showed a special respect, uncommon for the time, for women. Jesus regarded women in a truly equalitarian way.

One story that always struck me was when he was with his disciples and the crowds are pushing upon him and a woman who had been bleeding for years comes to find him. In that culture, any woman bleeding, whether it's hemorrhaging or her normal cycle, was to stay away from people. But Jesus was touched by her. The fact that he would let a supposedly "unclean" woman touch him speaks volumes to me about the fact that Jesus did not regard this as a negative. She was not unclean. All women have suffered from this lie about a woman's body.

So many Catholics have ended up with negative or broken views about sexuality. How did this happen?

Let me start by saying Catholics in no way have a corner on the negative market. I've been in front of other faith groups and they struggle just like Catholics. I think, sometimes, this negativity goes back to the Genesis story, the banishment, nakedness and seemingly imposed shame after the fall. But this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of Genesis.

The Genesis sin was about pride, not about sexuality. It was not about the body. But that's where we ended up putting our emphasis, on the shame. That was the start. For so many years we've had these negative notions of our bodies, as somehow they are instruments of sin. I try to turn this on its head. That sexuality has been veiled in a shroud of secrecy sets up a belief system that is fraught with misinformation, falsehoods and dangerous ideas. None of us have been immune to these ideas. They are part of the secular culture as well.

So to get it right you begin with the goodness and sacredness of our bodies.

Right. But let's be careful of the word *sacred*. Sacred for many of us can connote that somehow our bodies are totally off-limits, that they are almost untouchable. But our bodies, in the right instances, are meant to be caressed and handled in reverent and respectful ways. Children are naturally curious and sensate-focused. Many kids have been shamed because of God-given inquisitiveness and curiosity. A hand slapped, disapproving comments and looks send very powerful messages to kids. Those shaming memories remain and influence our view of ourselves, of bodies and feelings toward the body. Plus, when something is off-limits or taboo, it often takes on a level of interest that is extreme and then extreme behaviors can result. Talking to our kids with developmentally appropriate information offers them tools and understanding. If they are to make good decisions, they must have good information.



So when should a parent talk to their children about sexuality?

The problem is parents often only have one talk with their children -- if that -- and they think they are finished. I tell parents this needs to be an ongoing conversation, starting when their children are young, and they have to continue, in an age-appropriate manner, as the child grows and their abilities to understand expand. Think of these ongoing talks as booster shots over time to inoculate your children with powerful information that protects the child from harmful and untrue ideas. As your child develops, their questions should get more sophisticated. That's growth. You respond with correct facts and include your values. They want to hear from you.

You talk about sexuality in broad sense. Is that correct?

Often we tend to focus on one act or on specific body parts when we talk about sexuality. I teach human sexuality in a broader sense. Let's be clear. We are sexual beings. When a child emerges from the womb, he or she is a sexual person from the get-go. You are either a little boy or a little girl. As the child grows, he or she carries notions of masculinity and femininity, and takes this notion of masculinity or femininity into every encounter, every aspect of life. Each person has body sensations. Each wants to be held, each wants to be seen, each wants to be known. These are all elements of sexuality, all foundational pieces of relationships. None necessarily involves intercourse. Human sexuality, again, is about who we are and how we relate to other people, bodily or not. We need to view sexuality in this wider sense. Jesus did not express his sexuality in a genital way, but he was in full possession of his masculinity and what some call social sexuality. He touched people, children hung on him, he reciprocated in relationships, and he revealed his fears, hopes and loneliness. He took care of his body -- rested, ate, spent time apart, needed to be with people, risked emotionally and loved deeply. This is all about sexuality in its broad and equally important sense.

Maybe this leads to a point you make in your talks. You link human sexuality and spirituality. Can you elaborate on this?

"Linked" is a good word. Connecting with someone in a meaningful way is both a physical and spiritual act. If I am connecting with my spouse, for example, it isn't just about being physical. It's about all of our history together, all of our hopes as a couple, as a family. Our bodies are one instrument of the relationship. This is healthy sexuality. If there was no sexuality, if the physical were taken out of the equation, how would we live? We wouldn't hug people, we wouldn't inquire about one another, and we wouldn't relate and learn. We would live very drab lives. I don't think we would be human.

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Sexuality, then, is a fundamental part of what makes us human. So spirituality and sexuality are linked intimately. What we need to ponder is the way the whole notion of body and spirit are entwined. Some people even say we're spiritual beings having a human, or bodily, experience.

But this is where I find many people struggling. They compartmentalize. They separate spirit from body. Spirit is good; body is bad. Often their view of sexuality is very genital-focused. Separating things that are not meant to be separated creates serious division and pain. It is like we cut out a very significant part of who we are when we are unwilling to integrate this key aspect of our humanity.

The problem is when our views of sexuality become distorted. When we lose our balance it is easy for very destructive views of sexuality to have sway. There is a world out there that is very interested in filling our kids with other ideas about body and relationships. They are often dangerous and devoid of any spiritual understanding or intent. So it is important we get the basics right. I talk about telling the truth about our bodies. Give our kids their dignity, which includes telling them the truth and not being ashamed of who we are as sexual people. Many fear, "If I tell them, they'll go out and do it." The opposite is actually true. Satisfying their questions and curiosity actually postpones kids' experimentation. The unsatisfied curiosity propels many kids to search for answers. Tell them the truth and set appropriate limits.

Jesus said, "The truth shall set you free." He wasn't talking only about spiritual matters. He was talking about every part of our daily living. My approach, then, to education is very practical. It requires understanding child development and honing good communication. Then, be available to your children. They've got to know that you are available for discussion. As parents, we need to be open and not quickly judge them or they can clam up. We need to listen first or communication can shut down.

Anything else before we conclude?

I would certainly encourage educators and families to take heed of what Jesus said about not being afraid, not being anxious. We need to talk to our children. We would never send our kids off to the swimming pool without swimming lessons, but we will send them out into the community, where they're going to encounter many varied views and unhealthy approaches to sexuality, without adequate education and values. It makes no sense. We can be complicit with those who would abuse our kids because we won't talk about this.

One of the most powerful things I've learned about teaching human sexuality, one of the most powerful sexual messages we can give our children, is the example of the love relationship of a mom and a dad. The fact that they care for each other and treat each other with respect is so important. A healthy parental relationship speaks volumes to kids about security, love, commitment, resolving conflict and so forth. Remember, they really are eager for parents to bring up the conversation, though they may not initiate the conversation. So parents need to find teachable moments, opportunities, to impart information.

Ask your children if they have any questions, and even if they don't, tell them anyway. You might say, "Maybe you don't have a question, but here's some good information that might be helpful." Then you will have done something remarkable. You will have said, "I'm here and it is OK to talk about this topic." Kids don't ask to be taken to the doctor for shots, but we do it because it is our job and the consequences of not doing it could be dire. This is no different. We do it even though it is uncomfortable. It will enrich their life and possibly save it.

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Books to read

Recommended books to assist adults and parents in teaching human sexuality to teens and young children:

- **Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers** by Mark D. Regnerus (Oxford University Press, 2007)
- **Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy** by Marva J. Dawn (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993)
- **There Is No Sex Fairy -- to Protect Our Children From Becoming Sexual Abusers** by Jan Hindman (Alexandria Associates, 2007)
- **Healthy Sexuality Development: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators and Families** by Kent Chrisman and Donna Couchenour (NAEYC, 2002)
- **More Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It** by Meg Hickling (Northstone Publishing, 1999)
- **Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters With Intellectual Disabilities** by Karin Melberg Schwier and David Hingsburger (Brookes Publishing Company, 2000)

Book for parents to read with their children:

- **A Very Touching Book ... for Little People and for Big People** by Jan Hindman (Alexandria Associates, 1983)
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