

SIECUS

Study Guide No. 1

Sex Education

Sex Information and Education  
Council of the U.S.

## The SIECUS Purpose

**To establish human sexuality as a health entity:** to identify the special characteristics that distinguish it from, yet relate it to, human reproduction; to dignify it by openness of approach, study, and scientific research designed to lead toward its understanding and its freedom from exploitation; to give leadership to professionals and to society, to the end that human beings may be aided toward responsible use of the sexual faculty and toward assimilation of sex into their individual life patterns as a creative and re-creative force.

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# Sex Education

*This study guide is intended primarily for discussion leaders and for individuals interested in intensive, self-motivated study.*

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## *How Shall We Look at Sex— and Sex Education?*

Sex is far more than a physical expression; it is a major aspect of personality. As such it is intimately related to the individual's emotional and social adjustment and to his physical development. Probably nothing so greatly influences one's life pattern as his sex membership. [An individual's sense of identity, his ways of thinking and behaving, social and occupational activities, choice of associates, mode of dress, and many other important factors are strongly conditioned by being male or female.]

An individual's happiness, his success as a family member, and his civic contributions are either enhanced or diminished by his success or failure in fitting into his sex role, and in wisely managing and directing his sexuality.

Sex can never be fully understood simply by focusing upon it as a physiological process, by concentrating on the sex act, or by counting or classifying instances of sexual behavior. These facts do represent aspects of sex and they do need to be known. But the significance of human sexuality can be fully understood only by relating it to the total adjustment of the individual in his family and society. Developing these relationships becomes the task and scope of sex education. Anything less is shallow, distorted, and ineffectual.

Most people assume that, in the absence of direct instruction, no sex education takes place. Actually the parents' reaction to themselves and to each other as sexual beings, their feelings toward the child's exploration of his own body, their attitudes

toward the establishment of toilet habits, their response to his questions and his attempts to learn about himself and his environment, their ability to give and express their love for each other and for him, are among the many ways in which they profoundly influence the child's sexual conditioning. Avoidance, repression, rejection, suppression, embarrassment, and shock are negative forms of sex education. That fact cannot be escaped. Parents cannot choose whether or not they will give sex education; they can choose only whether they will do something positive or negative about it, whether they will accept or deny their responsibility.

### ***Common Weaknesses of Sex Education Programs***

Certain weaknesses presently characterize most sex education, particularly programs designed for children and adolescents.

1. *The sex education usually received by children can more accurately be labeled "reproduction education" or "moral instruction" than sex education.*

Even those families that provide reproduction information easily and adequately usually fail to go beyond this level. Once the child has come to adolescence and needs to deal with sex in terms of human interaction and as an aspect of relating to others, for all practical purposes he is left without help from the adults who care for him most. Education with reference to the use of sex in relationships and its meaning in interpersonal associations is left by parents and teachers almost entirely to chance. Actually most of what the child receives is supplied by his peer group.

The focus on reproduction and physical development is appropriate mainly at the childhood level, when boys and girls are consumed with curiosity about life and the world about them. They seek to understand origins, to know what they themselves will become. Even at this age, however, they should be helped to understand the place of men and women in the family and in out-of-family situations. It is a propitious time for attitude formation.

Reproductive and physiological information is more impersonal and has more preciseness about it than have discussions involving dating relationships, sexual behavior, and moral codes. The security of teachers or parents is threatened when they move to a consideration of issues and have to cope both with deep-seated feelings and a lack of knowledge. As a result they prolong the period for imparting biological information into adolescence and permit this postponement to crowd out consideration of the sensitive issues involving relationships and standards so much needed by adolescents. This insecurity also leads indirectly to the second weakness.

2. *Sex education is something imposed—something "given."*

That more and better education is obtained by interchange and the free interplay of ideas is an established educational principle. But few parents or teachers are adequately informed or sufficiently secure to engage in free and open dialogue with youth in matters of sex, especially when questions of standards, personal behavior, and development of moral values arise. A didactic approach may provide a feeling of security for the adult, but it teaches the child that free exchange and ready communication between the generations is impossible.

The openness of approach that is clearly needed, and the assumption that youth and adults are on the same plane in their freedom to express their views, are seldom present. As a result, the educative process fails to eliminate fears, misconceptions, and perplexities. Usually when specific sexual relationships become the focus of discussion, what youth then receives are injunctions and moralisms that provide little or no insight into situations facing them. The fundamental questions that youth of today faces in adjusting to human sexuality are seldom acknowledged and even less often discussed.

3. *Sex education is considered a "telling" process.*

The widespread acceptance of this view can be demonstrated by asking adults concerned with sex education to list questions about which they are perplexed. These questions almost always dwell on the timing, methods, techniques, and niceties of "telling" children about sex. This view overlooks the fact that much sex education is given and many attitudes are created during the normal day-by-day process of living — in the home, the school, and the community. Some of the most potent aspects of sex education are those experienced through nonverbal channels.

4. *Some education is regarded mainly as an insurance against moral "disaster."*

One could anticipate that most parents, could they but be assured that their children would lead conventional lives and would "stay out of trouble" without being "given" sex education, would doubtless heave a sigh of great relief. That sex education has further functions, for instance that it might serve to bring about richer, fuller, more successful man-woman relationships and therefore more complete lives, is seldom cited as a reason for sex education among rank-and-file teachers and parents. Even

when parents and teachers do recognize this, how to attain this objective through the processes of education is not clearly understood.

5. *Sex education is regarded as a wholly individual matter that is to be accomplished through reading or individualized teaching, and that is to involve as few persons as possible.*

This concept probably is not as strong now as it was formerly, although many persons are still fearful of the consequences of group instruction and/or interchange. Because many believe in the overwhelming power of the sexual impulse if it is given any recognition whatsoever, coming together for group discussion is seen as a situation likely to produce sexual stimulation and desires. Those who hold this view are generally interested in confining and limiting discussion as narrowly as possible. Little or no recognition exists of the value and need for many different approaches on many different occasions, with much to be gained from person-to-person, peer group, mixed group, sex-segregated group, and cross-generational group discussions.

6. *Sex education is considered to be a function of the home and an obligation of parents only.*

Although this belief is seldom realized in practice, it probably still remains as an ideal for many persons, one that is both impractical and undesirable, even if it were attainable. It is impractical because parents are inadequately prepared to undertake this responsibility. No one or two persons can be adequately prepared in a cosmos that has become as complex and as varied as is today's world. This is what makes sex education confined to the home less effective than that derived from many sources. In the latter circumstances children are much more likely to be well prepared to cope with the numerous and

conflicting views and practices they will meet in out-of-family living than if their education is limited strictly to what the family can provide.

Even if the family is considered to have the greatest influence, the school, the church, and other institutions have important individual and collective roles to play. Unfortunately, the achievements of the school in sex education have fallen below hopes and expectations. There are numerous reasons for this deficiency, the main one probably being that the school as a cultural institution reflects the fears, prejudices, and biases of society. As a result teachers are being inadequately prepared to provide the kind of sex education needed and are limited in opportunities for obtaining the needed preparation. The excessive fear of administrators and teachers of arousing possible criticism if they do attempt sex education is another deterrent. Each school and each teacher giving sex education usually feels insecure and isolated, so that the little that is attempted in sex education is done as quietly as possible in an effort to avoid possible attack.

Thus, comparatively few schools include aspects in their programs that can legitimately be called sex education, especially if sex education is broadly defined.

The church has an important and essential contribution to make to a comprehensive sex education program because it plays a vital role in the formulation of ideals and in the development of moral values. Instruction concerning ethical and moral standards must be approached positively and should include all aspects of life and all periods of the life cycle. The central problem is always the development of a philosophy of life, the creation of a set of socially meaningful and understandable values,

and the enthronement of a wholesome personality for oneself and for others as a major goal of life.

The churches are in the process of overcoming their former reluctance to deal openly with sex, and many denominations are now developing creative programs of sex education that will be a real contribution to their members.

It is clear that sex education is not a task for any one institution alone. Only as each contributes from its particular vantage point and its unique strength can one hope for a broadly balanced, societally-based-and-supported sex education program.

### *Objectives of Sex Education*

The foregoing discussion suggests the following as desirable objectives of sex education:

1. To provide for the individual an adequate knowledge of his own physical, mental, and emotional maturation processes as related to sex.
2. To eliminate fears and anxieties relative to individual sexual development and adjustments.
3. To develop objective and understanding attitudes toward sex in all of its various manifestations—in the individual and in others.
4. To give the individual insight concerning his relationships to members of both sexes and to help him understand his obligations and responsibilities to others.
5. To provide an appreciation of the positive satisfaction that wholesome human relations can bring in both individual and family living.
6. To build an understanding of the need for

the moral values that are essential to provide rational bases for making decisions.

7. To provide enough knowledge about the misuses and aberrations of sex to enable the individual to protect himself against exploitation and against injury to his physical and mental health.

8. To provide an incentive to work for a society in which such evils as prostitution and illegitimacy, archaic sex laws, irrational fears of sex, and sexual exploitation are nonexistent.

9. To provide the understanding and conditioning that will enable each individual to utilize his sexuality effectively and creatively in his several roles, e.g., as spouse, parent, community member, and citizen.

### *Scope of Sex Education Programs*

Since sex behavior is a function of the total personality, sex education must be broadly conceived, concerning itself with the biological, psychological, and social factors that affect personality and interpersonal relationships. It must be reality-oriented, dealing not just with ideal norms but with actual sexual patterns.

While no one has ever officially defined the scope of an ideal sex education program, the following areas for emphasis are important. Each should be included in a comprehensive sex education program.

1. *Biological.* This emphasis should include an understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the reproductive processes, sex as a universal biological function, the influences of body physiology upon sexual behavior, the relation of mental pro-

cesses and attitudes to physical urges, the nature of biological sexual maturity, genetics and eugenics.

2. *Social.* This emphasis should include consideration of sex in its broad social aspects and implications. The relation of sex to the family as a social institution; the relational aspects of sex; sex as a part of the total personality; the social significance of its uses and purposes within and outside of marriage; sex in its relation to population growth; the causes and treatment of deviancies; the social factors involved in such issues as abortion, control of obscenity, illegitimacy and prostitution — are suitable topics. The individual and social management of sex through education and the development of mores and appropriate legislation also need to be considered. The objective should always be to point toward a rewarding and fulfilling use of sex in individual lives and in its social setting.

3. *Health.* This emphasis should embrace the relationship of sex to general physical and mental well-being. The elimination of needless worries and concerns over normal aspects of sexual development and functioning, e.g., masturbation, sex play, and curiosity; cleanliness; the meaning of and adjustment to early or late maturation; the mental and physical health aspects of continence; information concerning venereal diseases; the basic patterns of individual and family living and relationships that promote mature and adequate expressions of sexuality — all of these provide suitable content here.

4. *Personal adjustments and attitudes.* This emphasis should include much material considered elsewhere, but the chief concern is for direct application of the material to the needs of individuals. Such topics as premarital standards; boy-girl associations; personal sex habits and practices; the

building of proper attitudes; a clear understanding and acceptance of specific manifestations of sex; and questions centering about personal development should be explored. Discussions concerning many of these topics have been found to be most fruitful when conducted in small groups under competent leadership. Provisions for individual counseling are also important in aiding personal adjustment.

By the time the individual reaches adolescence, he has formed a whole series of strongly-rooted emotional attitudes about sex. These attitudes cannot be changed by a casual, superficial kind of sex education but only by a process of serious education that recognizes the importance of emotional re-education and reconstruction.

5. *Sex in interpersonal associations.* Much of the material included here comes also under the preceding headings. The emphasis is so important, however, that it is listed separately. This emphasis should help each individual to understand and accept changing and evolving sex roles, and to work out his relationships to others immediately associated with him. It is essential for individuals to be aware of differential sex patterns, and to be able to accept and interact harmoniously with those whose sexual norms differ from their own. The importance of a sense of social responsibility and a desire to contribute to the good adjustment of others must be stressed. The family and its sex attitudes and sex education program are especially important.

6. *The establishment of values.* This is a difficult emphasis to outline in terms of specific topics, yet it is exceedingly important. The objective is to help individuals build values by which to live and stand-

ards by which to make important decisions, not only about sex conduct but about all other matters relating to individual and group well-being.

Building a value system is made especially difficult by the fact that we are in a period of transition that is characterized by a basic shift from sex denial to sex affirmation throughout our culture. No single system of sex values is currently accepted in theory or in practice by the great majority.

Because of this, many of the core values of sex education must be sought within the values accepted as inherent in a democratic society: respect for the basic worth, equality, and dignity of each human being; the right of each individual to self-determination; recognition of the need for cooperative effort for the common good; and faith in the free play of critical intelligence.

*Education*

## ***Sex Education— A New Look***

The inadequacies and the narrowness of the traditional concepts of sex education that have been suggested earlier also point to new ways of looking at sex education.

① *Once and for all, adults must accept as fact that young people of all ages are sexual beings with sexual needs. The purpose of sex education is not primarily to control and suppress sex expression, as in the past, but to indicate the immense possibilities for human fulfilment that human sexuality offers. Sex education must attempt to give the individual sufficient understanding to incorporate sex most fruitfully and most responsibly into his present and future life.*



2. *Sex education must be thought of as being education—not moral indoctrination.* Attempting to indoctrinate young people with a set of rigid rules and ready-made formulas is doomed to failure in a period of transition and conflict. Instead, the time-tested principle accepted in other areas of education must be applied: to equip youngsters with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will enable them to make intelligent choices and decisions.

3. *Sex education must help us understand sex in its relationship to social patterns and development.*

This can be approached from two points of view.

First, the distinction between what was and is personal in sex and what has social significance has changed greatly. Formerly, the chief social concern, as it related to sexual expression, was the repression of all aspects of sexuality from public consideration. Even such accepted aspects of sex as intercourse in marriage were seldom discussed. The sexual conduct of persons who were following conventional patterns of chastity and who were nonexploitive was never mentioned nor openly recognized as meriting approval and support. This is still the case.

Today the significance of such sexual expression as youthful erotic play, masturbation, homosexuality between consenting adults, mouth-genital contacts, and other variations from genital heterosexuality is being re-examined in the light of new knowledge. The enhanced capacity among educated people to look at sexuality with objectivity suggests that some things formerly considered to be of social concern might now be reclassified as private, personal concerns—or, if having social concern, for different reasons than formerly.

Second, a number of issues that involve sexual expression in relation to social decisions are now facing the American public. These can, perhaps, be

best expressed in the form of questions that in their answering obviously involve sex attitudes and practices. Shall laws regulating abortions be altered and, if so, in what ways? What is the relation of sexual expression and sexual standards to the public dissemination of contraceptive information, and to population control? What should be the legal and social attitudes toward homosexuality? Toward sexual offenders? What is a sexual offense and what makes it so? To what extent and in what ways should sexuality be emphasized in commercial enterprise? What sexual attitudes should the mass media stress? These are issues upon which rational, constructive policies need to be developed.

Such considerations point to the desirability of expanded and redirected programs for sex education. The social significance and implications of sex need to be understood by everyone.

4. *Sex education for adults must be given much greater emphasis.* Children and youth have typically been singled out as needing sex education. This has not been an error; they will continue to need help. But it cannot be repeated too often that adults are the ones most in need of help. Since a viewpoint on sex in keeping with advancing scientific knowledge and its relationships to individual and social living is so important, the needed education cannot be successfully crammed into early childhood and adolescence. It can be begun then, but it must be continued as long as life lasts.

Adults need sex education in their own right for several reasons: (a) to make their own sex lives and marriages more satisfying and creative; (b) to provide the informed public opinion needed to support desirable changes in attitudes, education, and laws as they relate to sex; and (c) to facilitate intergenerational communication.

5. *Those providing sex education must take into account the current freedom in choosing and in personal decision-making that now exists.* Forty or 50 years ago, sex education scarcely recognized the possibility of choosing among alternative patterns of sexual behavior. There was only one "right" way. Only one course of action was considered acceptable: renunciation of all sexual expression in nonmarital situations. In the face of such monolithic unanimity the thought of consciously weighing and choosing a course of sexual behavior occurred only to the brash or highly emancipated. The flouting of conventional standards did occur surreptitiously, but it was regarded as a violation, rather than as a matter of choice.

Quite a different situation now exists. There is now a very real freedom for adolescent couples to speak far more openly and frankly about sexual matters than their parents or grandparents could ever have believed possible. Many young people in high school dating relationships mention discussions with dating partners about the possibility of intercourse. Explicit references to sex not only enter many dating relationships very early, but are constantly to be found in commercial advertising, books and magazines, the press, television, radio and movies, and phonograph records.

As a consequence, young people of high school age and above are faced frequently with situations that require them to decide for or against participation in some kind of sexual relationship. This holds true not only for premarital intercourse itself, but for other forms of sexual involvement as well. This emphasizes their need for insights, factual knowledge, and understanding that will lead to sound decision-making.

6. *The chief determinant of sexual conduct is not factual information but the general feeling of satisfaction and worth that the individual has been able to develop about himself as a person.* One's pattern of sexual behavior is a reflection of one's total life pattern. An individual who feels he is accomplishing something with his life and feels reasonably successful in his endeavors will likely have enough satisfaction with life that the management of sex is no great problem. He will not be driven by guilt, anxiety, or compulsion to engage in sex with little regard for what this means to other persons or to his total situation. In other words, he is in a position to direct and manage his sexuality.

What does this mean for sex education? It means that, like all personal conduct, problems of sexual conduct need to be understood in terms of interpersonal relationships. The formation of patterns of fulfilling and responsible behavior (including sexual) will be facilitated by providing knowledge and, most of all, social experiences that enable individuals to set up meaningful, satisfying, and responsible interpersonal associations. As the individual finds increased satisfactions in his emotional relations with others, he will find decreased need for casual, irresponsible, and self-centered experimentation with sex.

7. *The core of the educational structure that can provide for the kind of sex education needed must extend far beyond the public schools.* This does not minimize or depreciate the role the schools should play, nor does it assume they will play a diminishing role. But other facets need to be regarded as integral to the sex education structure.

a. *Mass media.* The mass media are potent educational forces, but too often their thrust seems to

be toward casual, irresponsible sexuality. Motivated by the possibility of commercial gain, the mass media tend to emphasize the sensational, to play up "slants," to ignore the really educational in favor of the exploitative. This is not universally true; there have been some outstanding TV and radio programs, many good magazines articles, and a number of good books. These are overbalanced, however, by the massive overemphasis on the other side.

*b. Professional preparation programs.* Schools that provide education for the various professions need to give increased attention to teaching their professional trainees about man's sexual behavior in all of its many aspects. Physicians, teachers, nurses, religious workers, social workers, lawyers, journalists, and law enforcement officers are especially important categories. Schools that prepare these and other professional workers must incorporate this aspect of education in their preparatory and in-service training programs, and in their professional conferences.

*c. Adult education programs.* Churches, public schools, service clubs, YM and YW Associations, and similar groups typically develop programs of interest to adults. They provide an avenue for reaching many persons beyond school age, as do the mass media.

*d. Higher education.* Colleges and universities can make a highly significant contribution at this level. They have enrolled professional students as well as future community leaders. These people will play an important part in molding public opinion. Sex education should not only give help and insight for the present, but point the recipients to future leadership roles in their professions and their communities.

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