

## TEACHING SEX EDUCATION TO OUR CHILDREN

I read with great interest the Oct. 10 editorial concerning the role of schools in sex education. As the recent findings by the Kaiser Family Foundation show, parents often feel ill prepared to give their children the information they need on sexual issues. It's essential that children get the information they need, before they actually need it. As the editorial suggested, we can't afford to wait too long. Our children are feeling pressure to make sexual choices at younger ages than ever before. And the consequences of making ill-informed choices include HIV and AIDS.

As the editorial indicated, one way to make sure children get reliable information on sexual topics lies in age-appropriate sex education in the schools.

But, as a recent study commissioned by Girl Scouts of the USA indicates, that may be too little, too late. The "Girls Speak Out" study used in-person focus-group interviews and online surveys to determine the needs of girls ages 8 to 12.

The study found that girls in this age range were facing "teen" issues, including physical and emotional changes and the pressure to be attractive to

boys. Furthermore, the girls were frustrated that their parents seemed unwilling to discuss these concerns. When girls went to their parents for information on the physical and emotional changes associated with puberty, the survey found they often were told that they were too young to be asking those kinds of questions.

The truth is that, as awkward as it may be for us, as parents we need to be talking to our children about appropriate sexual issues when they're 8, 9 or 10. That's especially true for girls, many of whom are beginning puberty at age 9.

Although schools can play a role in providing sex education when our children are older, we can't afford to wait until then. Kids are developing physically and making sexual choices at younger ages than ever before.

Most important, our kids will actually listen to us during their preteen years! The "Girls Speak Out" study revealed that adolescent girls wanted their parents to provide them with information on sexual topics and considered their folks the most accurate and trusted source of information. Only when their parents refused to talk with them about concerns did the girls say they

felt they had to go elsewhere for that information, often to peers who knew even less.

If we start early with age-appropriate information, we're opening a line of communication. We're telling our children that they can come to us, that they can depend on us for reliable information. We're telling them that we will always be willing to talk with them about difficult topics. If we're there for our children when they first explore these challenging and exciting topics, chances are they'll keep coming to us and trusting our judgment in the future.

As the Kaiser survey revealed, that's something that we, as parents, might not be ready to do. But as uncomfortable as it might be, it's something our children need us to do. That means that we have to know our subject matter and know how much information our child needs and when she or he needs it. We have to study and become sex education experts in our own right because the information has changed since we learned it. We also need to relearn the basic facts of puberty, because our children are developing earlier.

We don't have to know everything, just enough to stay one step ahead of our children. We have to know enough that they'll keep coming back to ask us more.

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## TEN COMMANDMENTS

Proponents of posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings believe that exposure to Christian philosophy in government settings is beneficial to observers, especially children. Though our government has as one of its key principles the separation of church and state, many other countries integrate religion into their governments. That design for a government is worthy of advocacy. However, the opportunity for productive discussion is lost when attempts are made to slip the Commandments by the courts in the guise of groupings of historical documents. I challenge the support-

ers of this design to cease these efforts, state their position honestly, and attempt to change the laws that forbid the practice.

Supporters of these exhibitions often point to their popularity and to the ability to fund them without public capital as justification for the displays. I feel this illuminates some reasons such postings are ill advised. As a young Jewish medical student in Vienna in the 1930s, my father had to walk by groups of jeering Christian students standing under banners with swastikas and postings of Nazi slogans. Despite being privately funded and probably en-

dorsed by the majority, these exhibitions were inappropriate on school property, although they were legal. In our country, on the other hand, we respect the rights of the minority, whether or not they are in accordance with popular will.

Of course, it can be proposed that the difference between Nazi postings and Christian postings is that they were wrong and we are right, and, therefore, Christianity should be sanctioned by our government. There are arguments for the assertion that our country should be a Christian state, and for those who hold that belief the honorable course is an attempt to change our Constitution. Defenders of religious freedom would rally to fight such a change and the issue could be dealt with openly. However, efforts to sneak in state support of religion through a crack in the law are deceitful and should be abandoned by people of faith and integrity.

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