

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll:

Part I – Sex

By Marvin W Berkowitz, PhD

I came of age in the 1960s and found myself in the era of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. Some of you may recall that such things comprised the mantra of that particular generation. Now, I look back on those days from the weary, near-sighted eyes of a middle-aged man. Things sure do look differently from here!

I want to talk here about my reflections on these topics particularly as they relate to parenting for character. I'll do this in three parts—a ploy to keep you reading this column, of course. So today the topic is about children and sex and the part this element plays in a child's character development.

I want to begin by saying that sex is not a bad thing; in fact, it's a good thing. Let's put that on the table right now. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that sex anywhere with anyone at any time is good. Not by a long shot! (Note: I'm probably more liberal than some and more conservative than others, so don't expect to agree with everything I have to say on this controversial topic.)

So that you will have a better understanding of how I came to form my point of view it might be important for you to know that I spent twenty years working at a Jesuit university where the Jesuit fathers had chosen to forgo sex altogether. And I got along with all of them—OK, most of them—just fine. So I think you and I can still be friends too after you've read this column.

As I said, sex is good. The problem is that sex is not good for young children or for adolescents. Now you may believe that premarital sex is wrong or maybe you believe it's acceptable under certain circumstances. Regardless, you probably agree that adolescents shouldn't be free to have sex with whomever they choose whenever they feel like it (which for teenage boys is anytime they're conscious and frequently when they're not).

When compared with other industrialized nations, America is recognized as being a pretty up-tight society when it comes to sex. Because of our puritanical heritage most of us tend to find it difficult to talk to our children about sex. To make matters worse, research shows that when we discuss sex with our children most of us don't know what we're talking about.

But talk to our children we must! Regardless of our concerns, our children will someday reach puberty and the vast majority will eventually choose to have sex. So it's essential that children understand what it is all about.

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Typically, children ask parents questions they don't know are difficult to answer (or are anxiety-producing). And when they do ask such questions, parents often find themselves in a psychological crisis.

So here's what I suggest: Answer the question. (That is providing of course, that you know the answer. If you don't, then promise to find it.) Be sure to explain the answer in language the child can understand. Try "Women can start a baby growing once a month," and not "Lunar cycles of hormonal changes in the female reproductive system potentiate conception once every two fortnights." And don't answer more than the child is really asking. Remember the old joke about the child who asked, "Where did I come from?" to which mom stuttered through a painful explanation of sex and reproduction. The child, looking confused, then said in bewilderment, "Gee, I thought I came from Memorial Hospital."

Most importantly, own up to your discomfort if you're having trouble answering your child's questions.

For example, you might say, "You know, it's silly but I wasn't raised in such a way as to be able to talk about sex easily. There's nothing wrong with it, but Grandma and Grandpa never taught me how to do it well. You've asked a really good question so I'm going to do my best to try to answer it, even if I'm not very good at doing so." That way, you've modeled honesty. You've also relieved the child of any guilt he or she might feel from having asked a tough question.

And perhaps most importantly, you've taught him that talking about sex isn't bad. See? Even sex can be part of effective parenting for character.