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Familias, Pediatras y Adolescentes en la Red. Mejores padres, mejores hijos.

Sexuality for young people and teenagers

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Sexuality and adolescence are two words that, when together, cause a certain degree of worry in our society and also in the medical field. Normally, professionals think of all the risks: unexpected pregnancy, possible sexual transmission infections (commonly known as STI) and, furthermore, moral criticism: "They are too young to have a sexual relationship", "if we keep on like this, pills will have to be given in kindergartens", etc.

In mass media which usually refer to young people and teenagers' sexuality and in adult world, most ideas which are transmitted are negative. We still perceive adolescence and youth as a worthless age, a stage which "requires an effort to be overcome" and we deprive it of all values and positive experiences that include as a person and which build us as mature people.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that human beings are sexed. Sexuality and desire are in us from we are born until we die and they evolve and are expressed in different ways in each age and person, but they are there. And also in teenagers and children.

But, be careful! When we refer to sexuality, we are not referring to coitus or heterosexual couples relationships with vaginal penetration and simultaneous orgasm ... Unfortunately, this is something that it is implied and, sometimes, confused.

We live in a society which promotes a sexuality and relationship model focused on genital and reproduction. It is commonly understood that coitus is the only "authentic" practice, the most important one and the only one. This is a cultural inheritance focused on sexuality mainly understood as reproductive activity in which coitus with vaginal penetration is the natural "act" par excellence.

Reducing all practices and possibilities that may occur in an erotic relationship with vaginal coitus is enormously impoverishing but this is the dominant concept all over the world where we live in. Furthermore, coitus is the most risky practice regarding pregnancy and infection transmission.

Firstly, we must take into consideration that between two people who like them and meet there is desire, communication, pleasure, body intimacy and, above all, welfare. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as “the integration of somatic, emotional, intellectual and social elements of the sexual being by means that are positively enriching and that promote personality, Communications and love” (OMS, 1975)^[2].

Hence, human sexuality requires a renewed look where the sexual relationship is positively highlighted as a human fact and as a source of pleasant physical and psychic sensations where sensuality, caress, own and other body discovery take place and possibilities are widened to offer them: everyone can decide by themselves what they like, what they prefer, how and where is pleasure found and what makes them enjoy.

This, in our opinion, should be the message about sexuality that society should transmit to young people but, unfortunately, things are different and we notice this as soon as we switch TV on and see films: only coitus scenes with pretty couples, heterosexual and young and everything very fast and with some violence.

Our young people are strongly “erotized”, because of the meaning of this biological moment of puberty and of the erotic load of the society where we live and that is transmitted by mass media: advertisements, Films, magazines and, of course, the **Internet**. 57% of young people say that they find sexuality information in mass media and more than 30% of young people get their information from the Internet¹^[2]. But we send them a double message: “This is very good but still too soon for you”. However, they make their own decisions.

What about adults?

We must question ourselves, as adults, **do we really accept young people’s sexuality?**

Regarding desire, pleasure and young people relationships, discrimination is obvious: they are not "old enough" and this means "they cannot be responsible" and, although maturity and responsibility are learnt and acquired, it is also true that they do not come on their own with time. The relationship between age maturing and increasing awareness and responsibility in fact depends on adult people’s support apart from education and bringing them knowledge and media closer so as to help them grow, also emotionally, and that guides them in the process of becoming responsible adults.

From the viewpoint of moral values and, hence, moralizing, from a professional perspective, we can offer a more coherent view with the real knowledge that we have about young populations and, above all, more attentive to this group's necessities rather than possible "risks" derived from sexual activity. This view should not be modified about our ruling judgements about what we “think it should be” but acceptance of adolescent sexuality reality as it really is. Adolescent sexuality exists: young people like them, they look for each other and they meet each other. They sometimes love and have good relationships, sometimes frustrating and sometimes with great intimacy and pleasure.

There are boys and girls in their process of “sexualisation” and discovery of sexed desires, affection and feelings. There is a desire of pleasure and looking for somebody else, the first attempts to have a relationship, first love and also first flops and mistakes. But the fact that young people make mistakes or are exposed to dangerous situations does not mean that the risk is within their exclusive domain. There

are irresponsible young people and adults, from a sexual and other point of view. The more that couple models change, more men and women have to renegotiate the usage of condoms with their couple, use emergency contraception or interrupt pregnancy. According to statistics, voluntary abortion rate is higher in the age group of 26-30 years old than in the group of less than 19² [2]. We must never forget that young people have their own opinions and, as it is described in the systemic review of publications related to adolescent boys about pregnancy in adolescence³ [2], commented on this Edition of Evidencias en Pediatría ⁴ [2], boys relieve that pregnancy in adolescence have negative effects in their lives and consider that they must participate in decision-making about it.

We should not be alarmed then by news which promotes adolescents view as “careless”, “dangerous” or “carefree”. They have the same concerns than adults and maybe they need to learn more skills. That is the moment when the professional's role becomes essential.

It is necessary to think of those young people who work responsibly as volunteers, in NGOs, those who support their families in household chores, those who help their friends with studies, those who care for environment, those who play musical instruments, know and dominate new technologies and speak languages, even those who study or study as they work (earning money or not). We should take into consideration those young people who are not in the media and, fortunately, this is the biggest proportion.

And we also must think that adolescent behaviour have some concrete characteristics, free time is not carefully planned and neither is meeting someone, it just happens and autonomy and maturity is needed to plan how to act in that precise moment of one of the first erotic meetings in which you want, above all, know how it is and experience sexuality and pleasure. For an adolescent, boys above all, practising a coitus is one of the most important moments of their lives and of their self-assertion as men because it is just the concept of sexuality and the way of enjoying it transmitted by society.

The young people who we see determine in a great extent the young people we grow up and the kind of youth we build. It is in our hands to empower adolescents and young people so that they assume their own responsibilities and act consequently and, for this reason, it is necessary to judge, know and acknowledge our own attitudes towards sexuality and youth eroticism. The result is a new view and open doors towards satisfactory experience of boys and girls in their relationships. It really pays.

Recommendations on information, sexual education and attention to adolescent sexuality

A belief of adolescent population is that when they go to a health centre, we will "give them a speech" and if they can cope with it, we will be able to help them. From this point of view and with these attitudes, it is difficult that they come here to be helped when they need it and professionals have a lot to say about this. It is our responsibility that that “speech” becomes a space to talk or be quiet instead, to ask more than tell what we think they must know or do and to solve their queries and feel they are in a place where they are not judged or “scolded”. Just the opposite: we are there to help them.

From our professional role, we can and must answer young people’s queries and try to solve them: sexuality problems, doubts, methods of contraception, pill ... And this is not always possible from our overload surgeries

As all in this life, having safe sex, using a condom, for instance, needs to be learnt. Why not teaching it in the surgery if the boy/girl asks us what to do?

It would be good that some specific health centres exist for teenagers and young people because recommendations can be easily forgotten. To say “use condoms” and not having a place to explain, teach

and point out how to use them well is leaving our advice incomplete.

We highlight once more that, as in the rest of Europe, we must work in the creation and development of specific health centres, surgeries or sexuality places for adolescence so that to try to keep what already exists. It is also true that these are bad times for investments but investing in youth means investing in future.

Help them to make their own decisions

When we act with young people and are in contact with their sexuality, their way of living relationships and experiencing or looking for pleasure, it is essential to try to approach their experiences to increase their welfare sensation. Approaching their needs it is easier to help and support young population; increasing their degree of autonomy we help them making decisions about what they want to do.

For this big part of the population, which has not been properly educated in these topics, relationships are projects that are unknown until we do them and young people are not an exception. Ignoring their own desire can lead them to make unsatisfactory decision and "be in trouble".

We know that sexual education we have been given is not enough. That's why, it is never too late to learn it again and widen it. We can help them to discover themselves and to make them important questions: Who am I? What do I want? What makes me feel well?

Working from that knowledge about their own sexed body and emotions and feelings, also sexed, we can get to make a step towards acceptance and that that behavioural expression, "what they do" is oriented so that it does not man any conflicts or crisis for them.

Let's start from the beginning: people want to live satisfying experiences and, also, they can get it. Young people also do.

We are all different

From our professional view, difference must be understood as a value. There are no "recipes" to give teenagers because there are no two equal people. They don't like the same, they behave in a different way and they feel different when they take the pill, they fall in love, they have their first orgasm or get pregnant in an undesired way. We are all unique and it is in adolescence when we discover a lot of our peculiarities and differences.

Instead of helping to "normalize" (convey the sensation that everything is "normal"), our intention is to go a step beyond and view lack of rule but taking into account three aspects as a framework for them: **learn to communicate, respect towards peers and their decisions and confidence to discuss about it.**

When we refer to sexuality and relationships, there are no two identical people. There is not even a "better" sexual practice than another one (excluding violence of course). Traditional warnings of "good-bad" and "what to do or not" are not useful to explain or understand adolescent reality. An understanding and open attitude can help us to connect with them and to let them enter their world to become a support, an important help. This would be the beginning and there is still much work to do but the route seems to be interesting but for us, professionals, and for them, young people.

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This article has already been published in the magazine Evidencias en Pediatría <http://www.evidenciasenpediatria.es/> [7] and it is here included because of its interest for families and professionals.