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Preschool Sexuality Education?!

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Sexuality education in early childhood, whether delivered by parents or preschools, is often not offered via a formal, planned conversation or program. Rather, sexuality education is more often delivered via everyday socialization as parents, caregivers, and teachers answer questions, manage behavior, or encounter teachable moments. In other words, young children are already getting sexual education; it is just that adults often do not think of it as such. However, ignoring a child's behavior, answering or dodging a child's question about a sexual topic, or turning off (or not) the television in response to sexual material are all sexual education for preschoolers. The question becomes how might we more consciously deliver thoughtful messages about sexuality to young children in constructive ways in preschool.

This chapter will address this question through an examination of three aspects of sexuality education in early child care and education. First, it will critically examine formal sexuality education for preschoolers. Second, and more importantly, the chapter will review what we know from the small body of research that examines sexuality in child care and preschool. Third, the chapter will examine the hidden curriculums of gender and heteronormativity

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that shape sexuality education in preschools and child care centers. Finally, we imagine what lessons in sexuality education might look like as we draw from what we know about current practices and research. Throughout, we suggest that children already receive sexuality education through informal everyday interactions in preschool. Strengthening this informal system of education and not allowing “danger-only” approaches to define preschool sexuality education are key to its improvement.

Before turning to these areas, however, we must acknowledge two factors that shape the research on early childhood sexuality. First, in the USA, preschool and child care are provided in a hodge-podge of settings: expensive private preschools; large national chains and for-profit child care centers; smaller religious preschools; public preschool programs that function as part of a public school system; small group, in-home preschools; and everything in between. This patchwork of early child care and education¹ offer a diverse group of contexts in which sexuality education is delivered.

Second and more importantly, researchers know little about early childhood sexuality and sex education in preschool, especially when compared to adolescence. The key obstacle to sexuality education and sexuality research with young children is the cultural discourse of children as asexual. Through the image of the romantic child from the eighteenth century, children are constructed as pure and innocent and inherently without sexuality. Knowledge about sexuality in children makes them “knowing,” not innocent, and either dangerous or damaged (Higgenot 1998; Robinson 2013). Research on children and sexuality is complicated by methodological and political issues grounded in these discourses. Parents and institutional review boards limit what research can be done, as childhood sexuality is both developmentally and politically sensitive in the USA.

Nonetheless, investigating early childhood sexuality and possibilities for sexuality education are important because children live in a world saturated with sexuality. Even young children are likely to encounter a variety of sexual information and behavior (from the mundane to the abusive) through interactions with their family, peers, communities, and the media (APA 2007; Martin and Kazyak 2009). Children need tools to navigate these waters. Early childhood sexuality education can offer a language for understanding a sexually saturated culture; for reporting abuse; and for developing a foundation for a lifelong positive experience with one’s own sexuality.

¹ Because of the patchwork nature of caring for and educating children, I use the terms child care, preschool, and early child care and education interchangeably throughout the chapter.

Sex Education Curriculums for Preschoolers?

SIECUS Guidelines

There are virtually no preschool sexuality education curriculums as such. However, the Sexuality and Information Education Council of the United State (SIECUS) provides “Right from the Start Guidelines for Sexuality Issues: Birth to Five Years” (Early Childhood Education Task Force 1998). These SIECUS guidelines for early childhood sexuality education place sexual development within the context of six key concepts including: human development; relationships; personal skills; behaviors; health; and society and culture. Together, these concepts cover topics such as friendships, feelings, communication, body appreciation, sexual curiosity, self-pleasuring, sexual abuse prevention, gender roles, diversity, and equity. Though some of these subjects appear more directly related to sexuality than others, the guiding belief is that sexuality is framed by all other aspects of human development, and thus must be understood in relation to them (e.g. problem solving and relationships). Concerning sexuality more directly, the SIECUS guidelines details key messages to communicate to children (and how caregivers can implement them) in reference to: how the body works, where babies come from, the five senses, body appreciation, love and affection, masturbation and self-pleasuring, sexual curiosity, hygiene, sexual abuse prevention, and gender roles. Again, these guidelines aim to avoid stigmatization of sexuality and relate it to all other components of childhood experience. Guidelines may erase the separation between general body experiences and “sexual” body experiences, thus locating all embodied experiences on a continuum. For instance, early childhood education is intertwined with learning body management (i.e. learning about oneself as an embodied being) and gendered bodily comportment (Martin 1998). Furthermore, in lessons on friendship and relationships, setting boundaries, and other areas sexuality can be included to, again, highlight the idea of a continuum rather than distinction.

SIECUS explains that, though parents are the primary educators of children, child care centers must construct and maintain policies that are used to guide reactions to children’s questions and behaviors as well as the information given by and actions of the caregivers. These policies and their underlying values must be communicated with the parents. While caregivers should respond to children’s questions, information should be incorporated into everyday interactions and framed by positive messages so as to underscore the normality and healthfulness concerning bodies and sexuality. Guidelines are delineated by age; the categories are separated by infancy, preschool children, and older preschool children. All messages are to support a sense of diverse experiences so as not to limit children’s understanding or growth.

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

While SIECUS provides these broad guidelines, the other primary type of sexuality education curriculum for young children focuses much more specifically on child sexual abuse prevention. Child sexual abuse prevention curriculums date back to the late 1970s, and they proliferated throughout the 1980s. Child sexual abuse prevention is composed of a multitude of programs and strategies that are designed to educate children about child sexual abuse. Prevention efforts aimed at children include teaching the concepts of good and bad touch; personal boundaries (both the child's and others'); what "bad secrets" are; the child's ability to assert him/herself by saying no to unwanted touching; and refraining from being the perpetrator of such unwanted touching (PCAR and NSVRC 2011). These curricula also variously warn children against someone touching or asking to touch the child's genitals, someone trying to draw the child into a car, lure the child with rewards, and taking pictures of the child's genitalia (Deblinger et al. 2010). Some programs, as suggested by the SIECUS guidelines, recommend teaching accurate anatomical names for genitalia as a strategy for prevention (PCAR and NSVRC 2011). These programs suggest proper names will help children be able to communicate better about unwanted touching, presumably from adults.

Many different messages and types of information about abuse prevention are taught to children through the use of picture books, stories, videos, teddy bears, "the underwear rule" (children should not be touched by others and should not touch others anyplace that is normally covered by underwear), and other developmentally appropriate visuals and interactives (Bobier and Martin 2016). Research finds that programs are most effective when they are developmentally appropriate (McLeod and Wright 1996; Hulse 1997). Developmentally appropriate typically means in small groups, with opportunities for children to ask questions, in short periods, with information and/or involvement opportunities provided to parents, and props and interactive activities for engaging young children (McLeod and Wright 1996).

The effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs has been measured in terms of how much information the child gains and retains (Gilbert 1988; de Young 1988). One early study on the good touch/bad touch strategy found that children (elementary school age and younger) found the concepts difficult to grasp and retain (deYoung 1988). Other research suggests programs are most effective when there are a few simple concepts, appropriate length and style, and a balance between negative and positive messages about touch and feelings (McLeod and Wright 1996). Research on the effectiveness of various strategies of sexual abuse prevention in early childhood is hindered by the same problems that plague all research on early childhood sexuality.

It is difficult to get access to children and parents about these issues because of reasonable developmental and human subjects concerns as well as because of excessive concerns, often based in the assumption of protecting the asexuality of children. The idealized notion of children as asexual implies that sex education is irrelevant at this age. At the same time, the concern that introducing the topic of sexuality results in children's heightened engagement with it suggests that children already have latent sexual potential that can be triggered. This paradox makes research and intervention into problems like child sexual abuse difficult. Similarly, Angelides (2004) suggests that "Rigorous attempts to expose the reality and dynamics of child sexual abuse have been aided, if not in part made possible, by equally rigorous attempts to conceal, repress, or ignore the reality and dynamics of child sexuality" (p. 142). This desexualization of childhood results in disempowerment.

Much of the preschool sexuality education that exists as formal curricula is based in child sexual abuse prevention, rather than relying on an approach that draws on the breadth of "healthy sexuality" (such as that described by SIECUS). It is therefore helpful to consider how we can improve education and move away from a purely sexual abuse/sexual danger approach.

First, we might question whether such programs should be aimed at sexual abuse prevention. In other words, can very young children employ these lessons, especially in adult-child interactions where there are large power differentials? While adults can educate children to seek assistance to end abuse, and teach children that abuse is not their fault, we cannot expect children to prevent it. Adults are responsible for child sexual abuse prevention.

Second, with their focus on sexual abuse prevention, it is important that such programs balance positive aspects of bodies, touch, feelings, and relationships. Children should not leave these programs only with a view of these as dangerous, confusing, or bad. In fact, teaching general information about bodies, feelings, and relationships, much as in the SIECUS model, may give children the tools, language, and foundation to understand the difficult concepts of child sexual abuse as well.

Third, rather than focusing on good touch/bad touch, SIECUS recommends that caregivers present sexual abuse prevention within the context of appropriate relationships and individual comfort. By highlighting the situation, rather than the action, children are better able to understand the difference between interactions with doctors or other adults, and do not associate a sense of "badness" with genitalia and sexual behaviors.

Fourth, we need to better understand what calls for "developmentally appropriate" sexuality education mean. They meld together both the idea that young children do not have the capacity to process certain kinds of information or to

focus for long periods of time while sitting and the idea that young children should not learn about bodies and sexuality because they are “asexual.” We need more research on how to best communicate information about sexuality to children in ways they can understand it. Martin and Torres’ (2014) research suggests that what is commonly understood as developmentally appropriate may not always work. Children in their study misunderstood pictures meant to inform in developmentally appropriate ways. For example, a picture that shows a pregnant woman’s belly with a cut away to see an upside down smiling baby inside was understood to be a window that the baby was looking out of. Children sometimes could not cognitively understand the representation. Another example from Martin and Torres’ study, however, suggests the ways in which concerns about what is “developmentally appropriate” are about both cognitive ability and “protecting” children from sexuality. Also misunderstood frequently in Martin and Torres’ study was a picture meant to describe that babies come from both parents, from egg and sperm. The picture showed a man and a woman each holding the side of a construction paper cut-out of a heart. Scissors and paper were on the table. The text said, “part of you came from Mommy and part of you from Daddy.” The children who read this book asked questions like “what are the scissor for?” or “why did they need paper?” This kind of “developmentally appropriate” material obfuscates and confuses children rather than teaches them. In thinking about preschool sexuality education, we must think carefully about what scholars, teachers, and parents mean by “developmentally appropriate.”

In sum, formal sexuality education in the preschool setting is different from K–12 education in that it is virtually non-existent. To the extent it does exist, it focuses on child sexual abuse prevention. But the potential for building sexuality education curricula beyond abuse prevention is enormous and necessary. As we see below, preschool teachers report managing much sexual (or sexual-like) behavior among their students, likely even more than teachers of older children (Davies et al. 2000). While there may not be much formal sexual education in preschool, there is much informal sexual education. Preschool teachers and early child care providers need tools, like those suggested by SIECUS, for providing such education. Re-thinking preschool sex education means reinventing practices and curricula to integrate everyday “sexual” events into pedagogical practices of preschool.

Teachable Moments: Sexuality in Preschool and Child Care

Most children also learn about sexuality in early child care and education settings not through formal curriculums but in micro, local, and informal interactions. Most of this learning happens, as it does with parents, through everyday

interactions that happen spontaneously between children and between children and adults. A small body of research examines sexuality in child care and preschool and caregivers' responses to it. This body of research offers some insight into what and how young children learn about sexuality. Much of this research focuses on children's behavior rather than knowledge and attitudes. The narrow focus on behavior circumvents our understanding of the meaning of such behaviors for children. For brevity's sake, we refer throughout this chapter to children's "sexual behavior." However, a more accurate term might be "sexual-like behavior." Such labeling is filtered through the lenses of adults, who designate what is and is not considered to be sexual. While there is much evidence that some "sexual behavior" in children is common and developmentally expected, "the intentions and motivations for these behaviors may or may not be related to sexual gratification or sexual stimulation" (Chaffin et al. 2008, p. 200). In other words, actions and behaviors which adults may understand as sexual may not have the same meanings or uses for young children. A large research literature suggests that children's sexual-like behaviors may be related to a range of things from play to anxiety to imitation to curiosity. So, as we discuss children's sexual behavior in early child care and education settings and the opportunities for children's sexuality education to emerge from these, we recognize that adults and children may understand and experience these behaviors differently.

The existing research about children's sexual behaviors in early child care and education settings suggests that such behaviors are different than in the home. Evidence for this comes from studies comparing parents' and teachers' ratings on the Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (a check list of "sexual" behaviors and their frequency) that find low correlation (Friedrich and Trane 2002). Furthermore, the environment for learning about sexuality is different in preschools than in the home, primarily because child care centers and preschools provide extensive peer contact for young children (Hornor 2004). While children surely have some peer contact at home with siblings, cousins, and neighbors, these are limited compared to daily encounters with multiple unrelated peers in child care or preschool. Also, research examining children's sexual education at home focuses nearly exclusively on adult-child interactions (Martin 2009; Martin and Luke 2010; Martin and Torres 2014). Greater access to peers likely changes the kinds of sexual information and behavior that children encounter. It may also change the quantity. With the exception of one study (Larsson and Svedin 2002), preschool teachers are more likely than parents to report that sexual behavior is fairly common among young children (de Graaf and Rademakers 2006; Lopez Sanchez et al. 2002; Phipps-Yonas et al. 1993). Because such activities are, to a certain extent, normalized for teachers, parents and teachers are likely to have different ideas as to what

is and is not sexual. Lack of exposure to these relatively common behaviors may contribute to parents' strong reactions to these occurrences. These reactions often draw on the logic of the asexuality of children, thus marking these behaviors as deviant. Considering these events to be exceptional may allow adults to maintain a false sense of the asexuality of childhood. The reactions of peers, teachers, and parents to children's sexual behavior are then a conduit for learning about the meanings of those sorts of behaviors.

Little of the research about sexuality in child care and preschool has been conducted in the USA, but the research from northern European countries suggests that preschool may provide a unique setting for sexuality education as sexual behavior among children *is* commonly reported. A study from the UK asked preschool teachers what kinds of sexual behaviors they had observed. Teachers reported that the behavior they most commonly observed was "a child simulating intercourse with another child" (Davies et al. 2000, p. 1334). A study from Sweden also found that the "most common game" was to "explore other children" and the second most common were "games simulating sexual activity" (Lindblad et al. 1995). Teachers and caregivers in these studies generally understood children's sexual behaviors as ordinary. In another Swedish study, the majority of parents (88%) and even more teachers (97%) believed sexual curiosity and play was normal in children (Larsson and Svedin 2002). These teachers reported that "sexual play should be allowed as long as the children do not harm themselves or others in play" (Larsson and Svedin 2002, p. 261).

Despite this general acceptance of sexual behavior among teachers and caregivers in the northern European studies, there remained concern among teachers about children's sexuality and how to manage it, intervene in it, and to teach children from it. These teachers and caregivers were generally concerned about sexual behaviors that were relatively uncommon (e.g. unclothed oral–genital or genital–genital contact). Their concerns revealed their fear that children involved in these behaviors may have seen something "inappropriate" or been subject to sexual abuse (Davies et al. 2000, p. 1338). Again, this suggests that sexual behavior in children typically signals (sometimes accurately and sometimes not) danger to adults. Finally, it is important to note that culture plays a role. It is unclear if these many findings from Northern European countries translate to the US context (Sandnabba et al. 2003). We know that the research on parents' sexuality education and understanding of childhood sexuality suggest somewhat different approaches and understandings across these cultures (Larsson 2000; Schalet 2011).

Research from the US context is more mixed. Some studies from the 1990s in the USA find more ambivalence and uncertainty among teachers and caregivers who are described as "confused about what happens among youngsters

in their care as well as about how, if at all, they should intervene” (Phipps-Yonas et al. 1993, p. 5). More recently, Martin (2014) finds that while parents often responded to sexual behavior among children in child care using a sexual abuse frame (taking children to the doctor, calling licensing, calling police), child care providers typically responded to those same behaviors the same way that they would to any other type of “misbehavior” (biting, hitting, etc.). That is, “providers stopped the behavior if they saw children involved in it, told them ‘that type of play was not allowed,’ either sent the children to the director or reported the incident to the director, and wrote an ‘incident report’ with a copy for parents or talked with the parents about the incident” (Martin 2014, p. 1643). These routine practices, along with increased supervision, managed all “inappropriate” behaviors in child care whether they were sexual or not.

However, Martin (2014) also finds two aspects of child care providers’ responses that are unique to sexual misbehavior. First, providers emphasized privacy when talking about bodies with young children. “Second, on a few occasions, parents’ angry reactions to an incident caused providers to see a behavior as unusual misbehavior. In these cases they sometimes offered explanations to parents that ‘this doesn’t usually happen here’ or apologies to parents.” (p. 1643). Providers rarely apologized for a child hitting or biting. In this way, sexual misbehavior was different from other sorts of misbehavior. It required teachers to account for its most extreme forms.

As the above review of the research may begin to suggest, despite generally responding to sexual behavior and talk among children as if it is ordinary, caregivers and teachers in preschool still classify a wide range of the behavior as misbehavior and, more importantly, struggle with determining if/when some behavior is concerning or harmful, and struggle with navigating parents’ reactions to their management of such behavior (Martin 2014; Davies et al. 2000). All of these issues have implications for what children are likely learning about sexuality in preschool and child care.

Hidden Curriculums: Gender and Heteronormativity

Alongside formal curriculums and teachable moments, “hidden curriculums” permeate all schooling, and that is especially true for sexuality in preschool. Hidden curriculums are covert, implicit lessons schools teach, often about social status and for the purpose of social control (Giroux and Purpel 1983; Jackson 1968). Gender is routinely a hidden curriculum in schools and, in preschool, gender is an embodied hidden curriculum (Martin 1998). That is, children

are taught how girls and boys are supposed to behave physically, how they are supposed to use their bodies. We hypothesize that informal sexual education in early child care and education settings is likely gendered. We know that parents' sexual socialization of young children is gendered (Martin and Luke 2010). In particular, mothers discuss certain topics with daughters and no topics are reserved only for discussion with sons. Topics that mothers discuss with girls include relationships, the workings of reproductive bodies, and moral issues around sexuality. The subjects mothers address to girls indicate that a sexual double standard, wherein female sexuality is linked to relationships and morality, may already be at play in early childhood. The research suggests that "[e]arly childhood gender socialization produces differences in boys' and girls' daily social worlds (e.g. play, media consumption) that combine with a view of young children as primarily asexual, and with a cultural double standard about sexuality for men and women" (p. 62). These social phenomena together begin to construct gendered sexuality in early childhood as children begin to learn of the different expectations for love, marriage, and bodies that are imposed upon girls and boys (Martin and Luke 2010).

We hypothesize that the same sorts of gendered meanings of sexuality may also be conveyed in the hidden curriculums of gender. While we need much more research to investigate the intersection of a hidden curriculum of gender and informal sexuality education in preschool and child care, some research is suggestive. First, there is a vast body of research on the role of (pre)schools in constructing gender in many ways that cannot be reviewed here (see, for just a few examples, Best 1983; Jordan and Cowan 1995; Martin 1998; Thorne 1993). More specifically, however, we can see some indications of messages like those that parents provide being delivered in preschools. For example, Martin (1998) finds that girls are already being disciplined (Foucault 1979) to be more modest—to sit like a lady, to keep one's skirt down, not to reveal one's underwear. Similarly, other work with early elementary school-aged children also provides some evidence that informal sexual education at school is also gendered (Best 1983; Holford et al. 2013). Sexuality and gender are deeply intertwined, and thus education about one also conveys something about the other. Given that heteronormativity relies on particular scripts for men and women. Sexuality is, thus, read through one's femininity or masculinity (or lack thereof). Thus, when girls are taught to be modest and vigilant in monitoring their bodies, this may also communicate that women are less sexual than men (more modest) and that their bodies and sexuality must be surveilled and controlled. Such messages early on may contribute to the compromised sexual subjectivity (a feeling of control over and ability to experience pleasure in one's body and sexuality) observed in/demonstrated by adolescent girls and women.

Further, with regard to sexuality, gendered messages are woven together with heteronormative ones. To be a girl is to be encouraged to engage with discourses and play about love, marriage, and babies. Heteronormativity pervades early childhood sexuality education; it permeates most of the information supplied by parents (Martin 2009) and the media (Martin and Kazyak 2009). Heteronormativity is the bundle of ways in which heterosexuality is taken for granted as normal, ordinary, mundane, expected, and unremarkable. Heteronormativity includes the assumption that all children are (will be) heterosexual. Thus, talk with children about romantic and adult relationships often includes references to romantic love and marriage that signify heterosexuality only and a particular gender relation within that (Martin 2009). Heteronormativity is also deeply embedded in discussions about families, pregnancy, and birth whether these discussions include directly sexual/reproductive topics or not (Martin and Torres 2014).

While most of this research comes from parents (Martin 2009; Martin and Luke 2010; Geasler et al. 1995), there is reason to think that early child care and education settings are also ripe with these gendered and heteronormative discourses. These discourses are part of the informal set of interactions (hidden curriculums) that compromise sexual education in preschool. Again, we need much more research, but anecdotes and our own hours of observations in preschools suggest that heteronormativity is also part and parcel of many day-to-day interactions in preschool and deliver information about sexuality to children. These discourses of gender and heteronormativity are part of what sexuality education looks like for preschoolers. For example, some preschools have “prop boxes” that they rotate through classrooms for kids to use to engage in dramatic and pretend play. These boxes are often gendered and heteronormative. We have seen wedding prop boxes, princess/knight prop boxes, and new baby prop boxes. None of these would require a gendered, heteronormative play, but as children and teachers draw from (rather than challenge) wider cultural discourses, they most often reflect, enhance, and deepen heteronormative and gender normative themes. Preschools also teach heteronormativity through other lessons. We know of one preschool that taught that the letters “Q” and “U” always go together by holding a pretend wedding to celebrate the “marriage” of “Q” and “U” where the boys were one letter and the girls the other. Valentine’s Day coloring pages of a “girl” heart (distinguished by eyelashes, a bow, and heels on its stick legs) and a “boy” heart (with a bowtie and boots) holding hands also make love heteronormative, as do the many, many other cultural artifacts (books, posters, stories, songs, and phrases like “moms and dads”) that make their way into preschool classrooms. These artifacts are part of the daily sexual education practices of preschools and child care.

Finally, early child care and education settings engage with gendered and heteronormative notions of romantic love by drawing on media as well. This is particularly true as preschools make use of children's popular culture. Ask any teacher of 3- and 4-year-old girls about how much the mass Disney princess culture infuses their classrooms, and they will regale you with descriptions of 3-year-old girls branded with princesses and pink. While some preschools (especially those with particular methods like Montessori and Waldorf) may restrict such popular culture from parts of the preschool, many, many more find themselves engaging it as children wear shirts, bring toys (or schools provide toys from community donations), carry backpacks, have Halloween costumes, and much more that are part of this gendered mass children's culture. Some preschools, especially for "special" occasions, and in lower quality centers, frequently watch videos. Children, if they have not already been exposed to these at home, learn from them in preschool. In many of these G-rated films, hetero-romantic love drives the plot or is occasionally a secondary plot. In these films, hetero-romantic love relationships are portrayed as powerful and exceptional, even magical and transformative (Martin and Kazyak 2009). These heterosexual relationships marketed to children are not ordinary, but are marked as special as they are accompanied by soaring music, romantic, gazing eye contact, and images of sparks, swirls, and fireworks. All other relationships, including friends and family, are depicted as less exceptional, less exciting, and less important than romantic ones. These movies also have much sexual content depicted through what Martin and Kazyak (2009) call "heterosexiness." A gendered sexuality is depicted through the differences between men and women's bodies, the sexual allure of wiggly, skinny, skin-revealing women (especially in musical numbers), and the male gaze. These films are littered with sexual jokes and innuendos, as well as tantalizing sequences in which feminine bodies are portrayed as desirable, used to gain male attention, and eagerly consumed by men (Martin and Kazyak 2009). We do not have much research on what children take away from these movies nor what preschool teachers do to help children process these images. (In our observation, they usually simply ask children if they liked the movie or what they liked as these movies are shown as "break" from preschool and are not understood as something to be processed.)

Lesson Plan

So how might we imagine teaching a sexuality education curriculum to children in early child care and education settings? While there is not a robust literature to instruct us, the literature cited earlier lends some guidance. First, SIECUS can provide guidance and topics. It suggests children in preschool

should begin to learn the basic, developmentally appropriate information about how the body works, where babies come from, hygiene, sexual abuse prevention, gender roles, and to learn to appreciate their own bodies and to understand love and affection. This gives all educators a wide variety of topics to begin with. Second, the research on developmentally appropriate sexual abuse prevention emphasizes that early learning curricula should be interactive with lots of opportunities to ask questions, visual or play-like, short, and involve parents. Third, we also know that much early learning about sexuality is incorporated into day-to-day teachable moments. Structuring lessons that mimic other sorts of learning that children do in preschool and that draw on familiar routines will also make it easier to deliver content and allow children to engage in the topics with the same comfort and ease that they do with other topics. Fourth, the above review suggests that any introduction of sexuality into the curriculum will cause great anxiety for parents. Educators must work with parents to reveal the ways in which such material is already there and being learned without any adult guidance and what is to be gained for a long-term, healthy, bodily sense of well-being from such an introduction. We propose the following lesson plan based on these four premises.

We suggest using “circle time” an ordinary event in many preschools—to conduct sexuality education lessons. Circle time typically has a routine—an open and closing song, a daily story, or calendar. Embedded in circle time is often a short lesson—about friendship or dinosaurs or weather or many, many other things. These lessons are sometimes facilitated with a book, picture, story, music, or some other artifact. Teachers use these artifacts to get children talking, answering questions, asking questions, and developing their verbal and social confidence. This same structure can work for sexuality education.

Teachers might structure a series of lessons over several weeks around a series of words (e.g. kiss, love, marriage, boys, and girls). For example, getting young children to talk about the word love or the word kiss can facilitate beginning conversations that lay the ground work for many of the topics that SIECUS recommends. For example, the teacher presents the word “kiss” and asks what it means. She would then show a picture of a mother kissing a baby and then ask for more discussion. She might ask if this is the only kind of kiss there is. She might show a picture of adults kissing or ask who else gives kisses beside parents and children. She might ask the children if they ever do not like to be kissed. The discussion could then be developed into one about affection, boundaries, good touch/bad touch, and how and when we like affection and when it is wanted and unwanted. Depending on children’s responses, the group might also discuss if boys and girls their age kiss (cooties and other games teachers may or may not be aware of; Holford et al. 2013; Thorne 1993), if boys can kiss boys and girls kiss girls; what other

ways people show affection (hugging, holding hands, snuggling, etc.). Young children already talk about these things and make meaning out of kissing (see Holford et al. 2013; Thorne 1993). Of course, our fourth premise above applies—much adult/parent education and buy-in would be required to make such a program successful, and beginning a program with kissing might be too much. A similar lesson might be conducted about “love” or “marriage.” These words might allow a lesson to develop ideas about differences between children and adults (Robinson 2013), different kinds of love and affection (parent–child, for your pet, for your friend, romantic love), who can marry, who loves romantically. Children might then be sent to draw pictures of love.

Some lessons might take on what gay and straight mean directly. The wonderful documentary film, *It's Elementary!: Talking About Gay Issues in School*, provides some terrific examples of how elementary school teachers, including with children in the first and second grades, explored the meaning of “gay” and having gay and lesbian parents with young children in the 1990s. This documentary reveals the enormous amount of (mis)information that young children already have (mostly from the media) about what it means to be gay, and how schools can improve on their knowledge. While 4- and 5-year-olds are still quite a bit younger than elementary school-aged children, and brainstorming on paper or through a “word web” would likely not be developmentally appropriate as it was in the older *It's Elementary!* schools, preschool teachers could certainly choose to read from the many story books available that address gay and lesbian families for preschoolers (e.g. *And Tango Makes Three*, *Asha's Mums*, *King and King*). Stories, as a part of circle time, are a routine way for preschoolers to learn and engage with all sorts of issues.

Regardless of which topics a lesson includes, it is important in all of these that children feel safe to ask questions, to be curious, to wonder, and say what they know. For preschools and child care centers, engagement with parents around these issues, including invitations for parents to participate, materials for parents to follow up with at home, and teachers willing to talk and answer questions will be essential to make such lessons possible. Finally, the more these lessons can be linked to “teachable moments” that happen in the course of a day of preschool or child care (e.g. kids kissing each other, someone announcing a marriage), the better—for it is from these routine daily occurrences that children learn most.

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