

# Note to parents: Kids won't learn what they need to know at home

It is a truth universally unacknowledged by parents — including those who pulled 35,000 students out of Toronto schools this week to protest the provincial government's new sex education curriculum — that kids seldom learn what they really need to know about sex at home.

I'm not just talking about homes with conservative social values in which adults are rigid about premarital sex, appalled by homosexuality, frightened by "gender fluidity" and in denial about that all-ages sexual activity, masturbation.

I'm talking about all homes, including the liberal, open-dialogue home my children grew up in, one in which we thought we were being helpful about most matters pertaining to sex, but got very little accomplished in the way of imparting detailed information.

The time to get any important sexual information to kids is so brief it rushes by in a flash. In the early childhood and pre-latency stage they unselfconsciously ask questions that call for direct, simple answers. But then they speed through the eww! stage and tumble, lustful and yearning, into adolescent secrecy and turbulence, in which asking a parent about anal sex would be the very last thing they'd do. They turn to their peers, and to mass culture (think Nicki Minaj and her "rear-centric" videos) for their sexual information.

So let's not lie to ourselves. The parents who are demonstrating against the provincial government's well-researched, carefully updated and very necessary health and sexual education curriculum are never — ever — going to give their children enough information about sex to keep them safe in this complex world.

In that way, the Charles McVetys of the world — the evangelist leader who a decade ago was driving around in a "Defend Marriage" bus inveighing against same-sex marriage (he lost that one) and who is now making common cause with certain conservative ethnic communities — in this fight against the sex-education curriculum, are more dangerous to the sexual safety of your children than Premier Kathleen Wynne will ever be.

The demonstrators carry signs that say "Let kids be kids," and "We'll tell our kids about sex" but they really mean "values," many of which directly clash with the society in which they paradoxically hope their children will thrive.

One opponent of the curriculum quoted in the Star — Feras Marish — was asked "If students don't learn about sex, masturbation, and anatomy in school, where will they learn about these things?" and his sad and dangerous answer was "Why do they need to learn these things? ... It's a knowledge that should come from one's culture and one's belief."

Yet it's not going to do any good to add insult to ignorance by slamming those ethnic communities, some of whose countries of origin condone the beating of homosexuals, the stoning of women who try to claim their sexual rights and the forced marriage of young girls.

Their fears, especially when fanned by misinformation, are understandable. They are not mollified by a statement in the curriculum that says: "Parents are the primary educators of their children with respect to learning about values, appropriate behaviour, and ethnocultural, spiritual, and personal beliefs and traditions, and they are their children's first role models." Why? Because they know they are fighting a tidal wave of mass culture that is laying siege to those values.

In a way, all parents are immigrants to the land of popular culture. In the 1990s, I went ballistic over that wildly popular Arnold Schwarzenegger/Jamie Lee Curtis spy flick *True Lies*, in which a creep named Simon gloats about Jamie Lee's character: "She's got the most incredible body — a pair of t--- that make you want to stand up and beg for buttermilk, an ass like a 10-year-old boy."

That was 20 years ago and if you think the sexual climate is less explicit now you are living in a dream world.

In the real world, child pornography flourishes, kids are sexting by 11 or 12, young men consume so much online porn between 18 and 25 that some are experiencing erectile dysfunction, young girls are highly sexualized, and university-age kids still can't fully grasp the meaning of sexual consent. The Tinder culture has intensified a sense of, as one 25-year-old woman puts it, "how disposable we all are."

Compared to popular culture, what goes on in a sex-education class — around body parts, respect, consent, gender, naming sexual acts when appropriate — is so mild it is curious that parents see that as the danger.

Premier Wynne and Education Minister Liz Sandals have said calmly the new curriculum will be instituted despite the protests. They are right to carry on.

As for these woefully misinformed parents, they can still pull their kids out of class during sex-education, ensuring of course they will get a whispered or maybe texted précis of it from their peers.

Maybe the new sex-education apps being designed will one day make such classes obsolete. But for now, sitting with one's peers in a classroom, and yes, hearing a word like "masturbation" is still one of the best ways we've got to help our kids be sexually safe — and successful.

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