



Catholic Diocese
of Sioux Falls

Guiding Principles for Addressing Sexuality and Sexual Abuse

Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges facing parents, educators and leaders in the Church is how to address the topics of sexuality and sexual abuse. There are innumerable resources available, both secular and religious, that address these topics; however, our challenge is to approach them from the heart of the Church, guided by the light of faith. This document, used with permission from the Diocese of Steubenville, attempts to provide educators and church leaders in our diocese with a summary of these principles.

Two documents issued by the Vatican that deal explicitly with the topic of sexuality in educational settings constitute the primary sources for this text: *Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education* (cited hereafter as EGHL) and *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (cited hereafter as TMHS). Other documents are cited by name.¹

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Section I: Catholic Perspective of Love and Sexuality

“Every type of education is inspired by a specific conception of man and woman” (EGHL, 21). As Catholics, our starting point is a Christian understanding of who God is and who we are, having been made in His image and likeness. The Church’s vision of human sexuality is quite beautiful and full of meaning. It is rooted in the firm belief that we are loved by God and called to share in His love.

1. **God loves us intensely.** As Pope John Paul II declared: “Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church” (*Christifideles Laici*, 34).
2. **“[S]exuality is not something purely biological...”** (TMHS, 3). It’s not just about physical pleasure. Our sexuality touches the very depths of who we are as persons.

3. **Sexuality is a gift to us from God, and therefore is inherently good** (cf. TMHS, 11). We must not look at it negatively but always value it and respect it as God's gift, using it in accord with the moral laws God has given us through the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church.ⁱⁱ
4. **Our bodies are sacred gifts of God and must be respected** (cf. EGHL, 90).
5. **Although our wounded nature pulls us to be self-centered and selfish, love is about self-giving.** “True love is the capacity to open oneself to one's neighbour in generosity, and in devotion to the other for the other's good; it knows how to respect the personality and the freedom of the other, ... it is self giving, not possessive” (EGHL, 94).
6. **Men and women are equal in dignity** (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2393). “Femininity and masculinity are complementary gifts...” (TMHS, 10).
7. **Friendship is key in sexual love** (cf. TMHS, 14).
8. **Without chastity, our love is selfish and not self-giving.** “One cannot give what one does not possess. If the person is not master of self — through the virtues and, in a concrete way, through chastity — he or she lacks that self-possession which makes self-giving possible” (TMHS, 16).ⁱⁱⁱ
9. **True love involves the ability to make sacrifices.** “Chastity cannot exist as a virtue without the capacity to renounce self, to make sacrifices and to wait” (TMHS, 5).^{iv}
10. **Chastity is a positive virtue, not merely the absence of sexual activities** (cf. EGHL, 4).
11. **Modesty is an essential component of the virtue of chastity** (cf. EGHL, 90).

Section II: Foundational Principles for Addressing Sexuality

This section looks at some foundational principles for addressing sexuality. These principles are helpful in developing an appropriate plan for covering the material.

1. **The role of parents is crucial and must be respected** (see SECTION VI for details).
2. **Education in chastity is a work of faith.** “[E]ach aspect of sex education, in fact, is inspired by faith, and draws indispensable strength from it and from grace” (EGHL, 110).
3. **The sacraments and prayer are crucial to living a life of chastity** (cf. EGHL, 45). “From frequent and intimate contact with the Lord, everyone, especially the young, will derive the strength and enthusiasm for a pure life and they will realize their human and Christian vocation in peaceful self-control and in generous giving to others” (EGHL, 46).
4. **We need to look to the Mary and the Saints as models and reasons to hope** (cf. EGHL, 47).
5. **Sexuality must always be looked at positively** (cf. EGHL, 56). “In the teaching of John Paul II, the positive consideration of values, which one ought to discover and appreciate, precedes the norm which one must not violate. This norm, nevertheless, interprets and formulates the values for which people must strive” (EGHL, 19).
6. **Educating about human sexuality and chastity has three objectives:** (a) to build up family; (b) to help the youth understand the value of sexuality and chastity; (c) to help the youth discover their own calling from God to marriage or to celibacy (cf. TMHS, 22).
7. **It is essential to take an integrated approach to teaching about sexuality, giving due emphasis to the cultivation of virtue and self-sacrifice** (cf. TMHS, 55).

Section III: What is taught in the Classroom

The documents go on to present practical guidelines for directly teaching about sexuality in the classroom. Educators need to be aware of these guidelines when dealing with the topic of sexuality.

1. **Human sexuality must be explained in line with Catholic teaching** (cf. TMHS, 122).
2. **Catechesis must give the reasons and foundations for all moral norms, not simply inform people about rules.** “Given the importance of sex education in the integral formation of the person, teachers ... are urged in particular not to separate knowledge from corresponding values, which give a sense and orientation to biological, psychological and social information” (EGHL, 89).
3. **It is important to maintain a sense of the mystery of human sexuality.** “In an age when the mystery has been taken from human sexuality, parents must take care to avoid trivializing human sexuality, in their teaching and in the help offered by others. In particular, profound respect must be maintained for the difference between man and woman which reflects the love and fruitfulness of God himself” (TMHS, 122).
4. **Educators need to be aware of the individuality of each student, being particularly sensitive to each student’s particular situation and needs.** “Each child is a unique and unrepeatable person and must receive individualized formation....Each child's process of maturation as a person is different” (TMHS, 65 and 66). “[T]he child's sense of decency [must] be taken into account” (EGHL, 87). “[Education that deals with sexuality]...must always be adapted to the individual” (EGHL, 84). “[M]ixed groups...require special precautions” (EGHL, 72).
5. **The dynamics of healthy relationships should be taught and modeled** (cf. TMHS, 53).
6. **The value of self-control as the pre-requisite for loving and stable relationships should be highlighted** (cf. EGHL, 98).
7. **Modesty should be strongly emphasized.** “The practice of decency and modesty in speech, action and dress is very important for creating an atmosphere suitable to the growth of chastity, but this must be well motivated by respect for one's own body and the dignity of others” (TMHS, 56, emphasis in original).
8. **Church teaching on the morality of contraception and Natural Family Planning should be taught** (at the appropriate age) (cf. EGHL, 62).
9. **It is important to encourage the youth that chastity and fidelity are achievable** (cf. EGHL, 46).
10. **Solidarity and community need to be expressly taught** (cf. TMHS, 106).^v

Section IV: What is not taught in the classroom

In addition to pointing out what should happen in the classroom, the documents also point out areas of concern. The following are what educators need to avoid when dealing with the topic of sexuality.

1. **The intimate details of sexuality are NOT to be dealt with in the classroom setting** (cf. EGHL, 58). It is the right and the duty of parents to provide this information.^{vi}
2. **Graphic materials are not to be used.** “No material of an erotic nature should be presented to children or young people of any age, individually or in a group” (TMHS, 126). “For example: (a) visual erotic material, (b) written or verbal erotic presentations (cf. Educational Guidance in

Human Love, 76), (c) obscene or coarse language, (d) indecent humor, (e) the denigration of chastity and (f) attempts to minimize the gravity of sin against this virtue.”^{vii}

3. **Modesty and decency may never be disregarded.** “No one should ever be invited, let alone obliged, to act in any way that could objectively offend against modesty or which could subjectively offend against his or her own delicacy or sense of privacy. This principle of respect for the child excludes all improper forms of involving children and young people. In this regard, among other things, this can include the following methods that abuse sex education: (a) every “dramatized” representation, mime or “role playing” which depict genital or erotic matters, (b) making drawings, charts or models etc. of this nature, (c) seeking personal information about sexual questions or asking that family information be divulged, (d) oral or written exams about genital or erotic questions” (TMHS, 127, emphasis added).
4. **No child should be forced into any sexual instruction.** “It is recommended that respect be given to the right of the child or young person to withdraw from any form of sexual instruction imparted outside the home. Neither the children nor other members of their family should ever be penalized or discriminated against for this decision” (TMHS, 120, emphasis in original).
5. **Information about sexuality must not be given to children who are not developmentally ready for it.** “Only information proportionate to each phase of their individual development should be presented to children and young people” (TMHS, 124-125, emphasis in original).^{viii}
6. **Educators must take great caution not to expose youth to sexual perversions.** “(b) Homosexuality should not be discussed before adolescence unless a specific serious problem has arisen in a particular situation. This subject must be presented only in terms of chastity, health and ‘the truth about human sexuality in its relationship to the family as taught by the Church.’ (c) Sexual perversions that are relatively rare should not be dealt with except through individual counselling [sic], as the parents' response to genuine problems” (TMHS, 125, emphasis in original).
7. **Methods of “safe sex” or “safer sex” distort human sexuality and are not to be promoted** (cf. TMHS, 139).

Section V: The Role of Parents and Family

Parents and the family play a key role in the healthy development of children, especially in the areas of sexuality and chastity. The following principles outline the role of parents and the family according to the vision of the Church.

1. **Parents are the primary protectors of their children, in large part through education.** “Sexual violence with regard to children is not infrequent. Parents must protect their children, first by teaching them a form of modesty and reserve with regard to strangers, as well as by giving suitable sexual information, but without going into details and particulars that might upset or frighten them” (TMHS, 85).
2. **Parents must be in control of their child's education in sexual matters.** “Sex education, which is a basic right and duty of parents, must always be carried out under their attentive guidance, whether at home or in educational centers chosen and controlled by them” (Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, 37).^{ix}
3. **The family is the best place for education about sexuality and chastity.** “It is, in fact, the best environment to accomplish the obligation of securing a gradual education in sexual life. The family has an affective dignity which is suited to making acceptable without trauma the most delicate

realities and to integrating them harmoniously, in a balanced and rich personality” (EGHL, 48). The family is the primary place that children are formed in virtue (cf. TMHS, 48).

4. **The example parents give of modesty and chastity is crucial.** “Christian parents must know that their example represents the most valid contribution in the education of their children” (EGHL, 50).
5. **The role of parents cannot be downplayed or discarded.** “Other educators can assist in this task, but they can only take the place of parents for serious reasons of physical or moral incapacity” (TMHS, 23). “Parents are the first and most important educators of their children, and they also possess a fundamental competency in this area: they are educators because they are parents.... [A]ll other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent and, to a certain degree, with their authorization” (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families, 16, emphasis in original).^x “No one is capable of giving moral education in this delicate area better than duly prepared parents” (TMHS, 43). “The parents' task of informing and instructing is necessary, not because their sons [and daughters] would not know about sexual reality in other ways, but so that they will know about it in the right light.” (TMHS, 93, emphasis added).
6. **Parents must be clear and positive about sexual morality.** “In answering children's questions, parents should offer well-reasoned arguments about the great value of chastity and show the intellectual and human weakness of theories that inspire permissive and hedonistic behavior. They will answer clearly, without giving excessive importance to pathological sexual problems. Nor will they give the false impression that sex is something shameful or dirty, because it is a great gift of God who placed the ability to generate life in the human body, thereby sharing his creative power with us” (TMHS, 96, emphasis in original).
7. **Parents need to collaborate with others in forming their children.** “In their turn, parents should remember that the family is not the only or exclusive formative community. Thus they should cultivate a cordial and active relationship with other persons who can help them, while never forgetting their own inalienable rights” (TMHS, 148). “Openness and collaboration of parents with other educators who are co-responsible for formation, will positively influence the maturation of young people” (EGHL, 51).
8. **Parents cannot be required to accept help in teaching their children about sexuality.** “But if parents believe themselves to be capable of providing an adequate education for love, they are not bound to accept assistance” (TMHS, 146).

Section VI: The Role of Church and School

The documents also outline the role of the Church and the School in reference to teaching about sexuality. These principles provide guidance for educators and church leaders as they develop and evaluate their strategies for dealing with sexuality.

1. **Moral formation is the duty of the Church.** “In accomplishing her mission the Church has the duty and the right to take care of the moral education of the baptized” (EGHL, 108).
2. **The Church must work to education people in chastity.** “[T]here is urgent need to give positive and gradual affective-sex education to children, adolescents and young adults, paying attention to the dispositions of Vatican Council II. Silence is not a valid norm of conduct in this matter...” (EGHL, 106).

3. **The formation of parents should be the highest priority.** “It is clear that the assistance of others must be given first and foremost to parents rather than to their children” (TMHS, 145)^{xii}. “[T]he Church holds that it is her duty to give parents back confidence in their own capabilities and help them to carry out their task” (TMHS, 47).^{xiii}
4. **Parents must be fully supported by the Church in their efforts to raise their children** (cf. TMHS, 148).
5. **Schools can never substitute for parents and the family.** “The school's task is not to substitute for the family, rather it is ‘assisting and completing the work of parents, furnishing children and adolescents with an evaluation of sexuality as value and task of the whole person, created male and female in the image of God’” (TMHS, 64, quoting EGHL, 69).^{xiv}
6. **Church and school need to work collaboratively with parents.** “Only a strict collaboration between the school and the family will be able to guarantee an advantageous exchange of experience between parents and teachers for the good of the pupils” (EGHL, 72). “Openness and collaboration of parents with other educators who are co-responsible for formation, will positively influence the maturation of young people” (EGHL, 51).
7. **Schools must assist and complete the work of parents** (cf. EGHL, 69).
8. **The selection and formation of qualified educators is crucial.** “The mature personality of the teachers, their training and psychological balance strongly influence their pupils. An exact and complete vision of the meaning and value of sexuality and a peaceful integration within the personality itself are indispensable for teachers in constructive education. Their training takes shape according to environment. Their ability is not so much the fruit of theoretical knowledge but rather the result of their affective maturity. This does not dispense with the acquisition of scientific knowledge suited to their educational work, which is particularly arduous these days. Meetings with parents can be of great help” (EGHL, 79).^{xv}

Endnotes

ⁱ Texts cited in this document are the following. From Pope John Paul II: Letter to Families, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (*Familiaris Consortio*), and On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful (*Christifideles Laici*). Other Vatican documents: Catechism of the Catholic Church, Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education, and The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family. All of these documents are quoted from the Vatican website, www.vatican.va.

ⁱⁱ “Indeed, both in the Scriptures (cf. Song of Songs 1-8; Hosea 2; Jeremiah 3: 1-3; Ezekial 23, etc.) and in the Christian mystical tradition, conjugal love has always been considered a symbol and image of God's love for us” (TMHS, 96).

ⁱⁱⁱ Also note: “It must never be forgotten that the disordered use of sex tends progressively to destroy the person's capacity to love by making pleasure, instead of sincere self-giving, the end of sexuality and by reducing other persons to objects of one's own gratification. In this way the meaning of true love between a man and a woman (love always open to life) is weakened as well as the family itself” (TMHS, 105).

^{iv} Also note: “The stability of marriage and of conjugal love requires as indispensable conditions: chastity and self-control, the formation of character and the spirit of sacrifice” (EGHL, 61).

^v “In the face of what hedonistic groups propose, especially in affluent societies, it is very important to present young people with the ideals of human and Christian solidarity and concrete ways of being committed in Church associations, movements and voluntary Catholic and missionary activities” (TMHS, 106).

^{vi} “Catechesis on morality may be provided by other trustworthy persons, with particular emphasis on sexual ethics at puberty and adolescence. Parents should take an interest in the moral catechesis which is given to their own children outside the home and use it as a support for their own educational work. Such catechesis must not include the more intimate aspects of sexual information, whether biological or affective, which belong to individual formation within the family” (TMHS, 133, emphasis in original).

^{vii} Footnote to TMHS, 126, found in the print edition published by Pauline Books & Media (emphasis added).

^{viii} Also note: “In some societies today, there are planned and determined attempts to impose premature sex information on children. But, at this stage of development [age 5 to puberty], children are still not capable of fully understanding the value of the affective dimension of sexuality. They cannot understand and control sexual imagery within the proper context of moral principles and, for this reason, they cannot integrate premature sexual information with moral responsibility. Such information tends to shatter their emotional and educational development and to disturb the natural serenity of this period of life. Parents should politely but firmly exclude any attempts to violate children's innocence because such attempts compromise the spiritual, moral and emotional development of growing persons who have a right to their innocence” (TMHS, 83, emphasis in original).

^{ix} Also note: “In the case where parents are helped by others in educating their own children for love, it is recommended that they keep themselves precisely informed on the content and methodology with which such supplementary education is imparted. No one can bind children or young people to secrecy about the content and method of instruction provided outside the family....In all cases, their right to be present during classes cannot be denied” (TMHS, 115 and 116, emphasis in original).

^x Full quote: “Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children, and they also possess a fundamental competence in this area: they are educators because they are parents. They share their educational mission with other individuals or institutions, such as the Church and the State. But the mission of education must always be carried out in accordance with a proper application of the principle of subsidiarity. This implies the legitimacy and indeed the need of giving assistance to the parents, but finds its intrinsic and absolute limit in their prevailing right and their actual capabilities. The principle of subsidiarity is thus at the service of parental love, meeting the good of the family unit. For parents by themselves are not capable of satisfying every requirement of the whole process of raising children, especially in matters concerning their schooling and the entire gamut of socialization. Subsidiarity thus complements paternal and maternal love and confirms its fundamental nature, inasmuch as all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent and, to a certain degree, with their authorization” (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families, 16, emphasis in original).

^{xi} Full quote: “There are various ways of helping and supporting parents in fulfilling their fundamental right and duty to educate their children for love. Such assistance never means taking from parents or diminishing their formative right and duty, because they remain “original and primary”, “irreplaceable and inalienable”. Therefore, the role which others can carry out in helping parents is always (a) subsidiary, because the formative role of the family is always preferable, and (b) subordinate, that is, subject to the parents' attentive guidance and control. Everyone must observe the right order of cooperation and collaboration between parents and those who can help them in their task” (TMHS, 145, emphasis in original).

^{xii} Full quote: “We cannot forget, however, that we are dealing with a right and duty to educate which, in the past, Christian parents carried out or exercised little. Perhaps this was because the problem was not as acute as it is today, or because the parents' task was in part fulfilled by the strength of prevailing social models and the role played by the Church and the Catholic school in this area. It is not easy for parents to take on this educational commitment because today it appears to be rather complex, and greater than what the family could offer, also because, in most cases, it is not possible to refer to what one's own parents did in this regard. Therefore, through this document, the Church holds that it is her duty to give parents back confidence in their own capabilities and help them to carry out their task” (TMHS, 47).

^{xiii} Also see note 11 above.

^{xiv} Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* offers an authentically Catholic vision for human sexuality, rooted in Sacred Scripture and Church Tradition. It is an important resource for educators who deal with the topic of sexuality. Many articles and resources are available about the Theology of the Body. The following websites have a host of information on this topic: www.tobinstitute.org and www.christopherwest.com.