

Where do kids learn about sex?

My youngest son wanted to know, and probably knew more at 7 than my mother and I combined knew at 13. BY SHARON BIRD ANDERSON

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One day not long ago, I found an unused condom dangling from a tiny branch on my birch tree.

I must say that I had mixed feelings about this finding, sad to think that one of the teens here for my sons party was mature enough to think that he or she needed one; at the same time pleased that one young person was responsible enough to carry the thing in case he or she might need to use it. I certainly took no pleasure as a parent in thinking that it may have belonged to one of my own children and decided it best to believe it belonged to one of the other 20 or so teens who had visited on that weekend. Small pleasure came from the fact that my young birch tree was in greater need of a condom than the visiting teens.

I laughed at my prudish opinion of thinking that none of my children might be involved in teenage sex, and realized that perhaps it was attitudes like mine that had caused the controversy over sex education in New Brunswick last spring. People want to think that their children won't do anything wrong, but mistakes happen and if we as adults can prevent some, then we are doing a great service for our children.

With my own children either finished high school or close to the end, I didn't give much attention to the new provincial health curriculum designed for middle-school-aged children. The controversial pros and cons of teaching this age group about reproduction, safe sex, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, have been very much in the news.

There are parents and grandparents against the program because they believe "it promotes premarital sex," while people on the other side are in favour of the program and hope it will cut down on unwanted teen pregnancies and sexual disease. Regardless of who provides the information to these children, it should be done with honest, easy-to-understand

material.

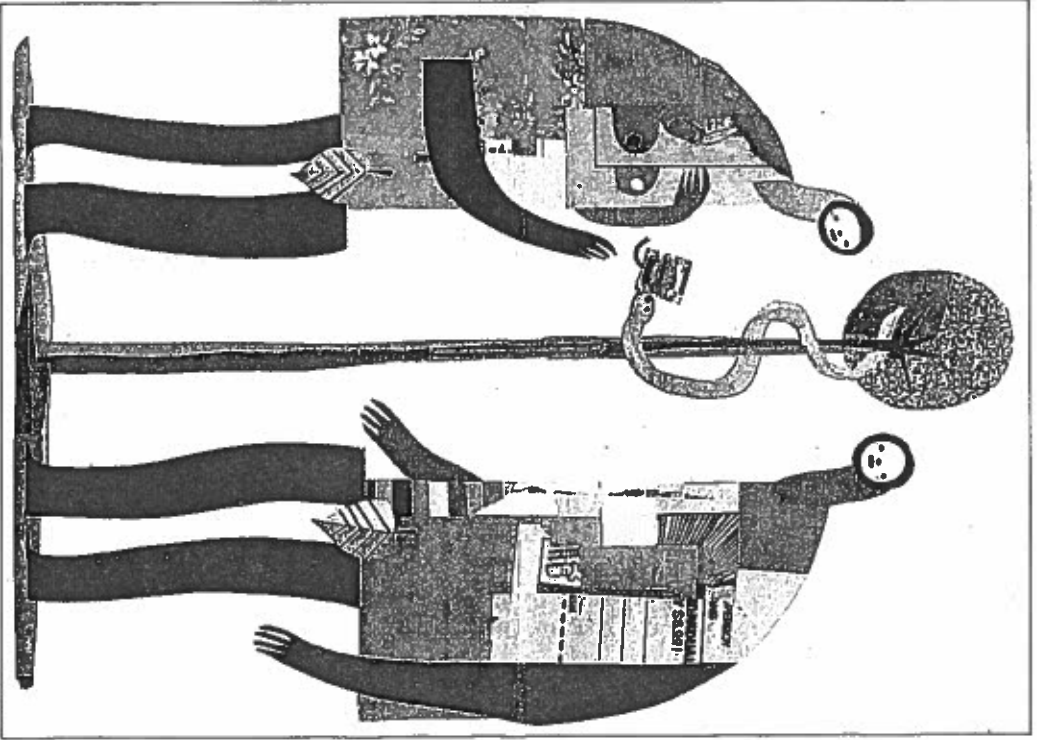
Since different children mature at different ages, I hope that those responsible for the program will take this into account. While I feel that parents should have a major role in discussing premarital sex and reproduction with their children, it is not easy for some and completely unthinkable for others.

However, if the topic is covered in a health education program at school, little Tommy or Sally may be too shy to ask the teacher questions and may save them for a parent. That parent should be darned ready to answer honestly. What a perfect opportunity to encourage a child to openly communicate with a parent in case other issues arise.

When my youngest son came home from school in Grade 1 or 2 and revealed that he had found a used condom on the playground, I was just less than mortified. Had the child handled anything that could pose a health risk? I stayed calm and asked him what it looked like. "It was big and round, and made from shiny metal." I'm sure the neighbours heard my sigh of relief. I asked the child what made him think the piece of pipe, tin can or whatever it was, was actually a condom. "Well, the big boys told me. What is a condom anyway?"

As I tried not to choke, I decided that the best answer to a child's question was an honest one, even considering his age. So I explained that a condom was made from soft thin rubber and was put on a man's penis to prevent a man from making babies with a woman. I counted on him getting his answer, being disgusted, and letting it go. But this inquisitive youngster always wanted to know how everything works. After what seemed like hours, our sex education chat ranged from condom use to intercourse and how women's bellies grow to the size of watermelons because there's a baby inside, as well as the grand finale of how babies make their debut into the world.

This child wanted to know, and prob-



DAVID WHITE

ably knew more at seven years old than my mother and I combined knew at 13. Each time he asked a question, I responded with an honest answer.

He was amazed by the process for some reason. When his older siblings came home later, he proceeded to tell them what he had learned that day, which sparked their interest as well. Great! I had to do two sex education discussions in one day.

Thank god, I only had three students. As I said earlier, I haven't paid much attention to the proposed sex education agenda because I discussed reproduction and sex with my youngsters. What I do know is there will be a permission slip to

sign either for or against your child's participation in this program at school.

But beware, parents. If they're not allowed to participate in the school program, and you feel uncomfortable discussing the topic, there are only two other options for teaching kids about sex education. They'll learn by experience "out behind the barn," as our parents and grandparents did, or you can grow a condom tree in your back yard and hope your children ask someone else what they are, and what to do with them.

Sharon Bird Anderson lives in Kingsley, N.B.