AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Shelley Lynne Knudsen-Lindauer for the degree of Master of Science in Family Life presented on August 21, 1979

Title: Sex Education Practices of Mothers and Fathers With Preschool Children

Abstract approved: Redacted for privacy

Sally A. Koblinsky

This study examines the sex education practices of middle class parents with preschool children. Subjects were 128 parents of three- to five-year-old children, including 37 mothers of daughters, 37 mothers of sons, 27 fathers of daughters, and 27 fathers of sons. These parents were administered a sex education questionnaire examining children's curiosity about genital differences, curiosity about birth and reproduction, use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play. In each area, parents provided information about the frequency with which they observed the behavior, the manner in which they responded to the behavior, and the level of comfort they experienced in responding. Results indicated that the majority of parents had encountered questions about genital differences, questions about reproduction, and masturbation. Moreover, half of the sample had encountered obscene language and one quarter had observed sex play. Chi square analyses revealed that mothers and fathers were equally likely to have observed all five sexual behaviors. However, parents of sons were significantly more likely than parents of daughters to have observed masturbation.
An examination of parents' responses to the various sexual behaviors revealed that parents provided more accurate information about genital sex differences to daughters than sons. Another notable finding was that the majority of parents failed to provide their children with an accurate description of reproduction and birth. Parents were most likely to ignore their children's masturbation, and to respond to obscene language with a negative sanction. Finally, the data revealed that parents felt quite comfortable in responding to children's sexual questions and behaviors. An analysis of variance performed on comfort ratings also revealed that parents of sons experienced more comfort than parents of daughters in responding to children's questions about genital differences and reproduction. The implications of current findings for sex education programs were discussed.
Sex Education Practices of Mothers and Fathers
With Preschool Children

by

Shelley L. Knudsen-Lindauer

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science

June 1980
APPROVED

Redacted for privacy

Professor of Family Life
in charge of major

Redacted for privacy

Head of Department of Family Life

Redacted for privacy

Dean of Graduate School

Date thesis is presented August 21, 1979

Typed by J.W.L. for Shelley L. Knudsen-Lindauer
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Orientation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Literature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Present Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>METHOD</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrument</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Parents Who Observed Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Parental Observations of Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Responses to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Comfort in Responding to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Observations of Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Responses to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Comfort in Responding to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDICES</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Parent Sex Education Questionnaire</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Parent Letter</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Who Observed Each Sexual Question or Behavior</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frequency With Which Parents Encountered Children's Sexual Behaviors</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response to Answer Questions About Genital Differences</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response to Answer Questions About Birth and Reproduction</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response When Child Uses Obscene Words</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response When Child Masturbates</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response When Child Engages in Sex Play</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mean Amount of Comfort Experienced by Parents When Encountering Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sexuality is an integral part of the individual's basic identity. Sex education is a continuous process which spans the life cycle. A significant amount of sex education has been found to occur in infancy (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard, 1953) and early childhood (Reiss, 1967; McNab, 1976). Parents are assumed to play a major role in this process, as they respond to young children's sexual questions and behaviors and convey their attitudes about bodily functions and pleasures. Yet despite the recognized importance of early childhood in the formation of sexual attitudes, there have been no studies of preschool parents' sex education practices for over ten years. Moreover, the previous studies have not adequately explored the differential socialization of sons and daughters. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the current sex education practices of preschool parents, as a function of sex of parent and sex of child.

Theoretical Orientation

Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of interactions with others in the process of learning. Social rewards are believed to create an increase in specific behaviors, whereas punishment or lack of attention may effectively reduce their occurrence (Bandura and Walters, 1963). Moreover, learning also occurs through the imitation of
a role model's attitudes and behaviors (Bandura and Walters, 1963).

A great deal of sexual learning occurs in early childhood (Reiss, 1967). Parents reinforce their children for displaying sexual behaviors that are consistent with their own value systems (McNab, 1976). Verbal and physical sanctions may be used to communicate that certain behaviors are "wrong" or inappropriate. Nonverbal methods of communication also convey sexual attitudes. For example, a parent who frowns when his/her son touches his penis silently conveys to the child that this behavior is inappropriate or unacceptable.

Children also learn about sexuality through observation of their parents and other adults (McNab, 1976). The development of such behaviors as modesty may be influenced by observing parents in routine activities. Likewise, an understanding of the kinds of behaviors appropriate in heterosexual relationships is gained from observing parent's displays of verbal and physical affection toward each other.

Parents not only contribute to the development of sexual attitudes, but also serve as role models for sex education. An individual's experiences with sex education in the family provide information about the parent(s) who should assume responsibility for this task, and convey specific ways of responding to children's questions and behaviors. Traditionally, mothers have assumed the major responsibility for child-rearing and have thus become more involved in young children's sex education (Harter and Parrish, 1968). If today's parents have observed their own mother taking more responsibility for this task, they may continue this traditional role assignment in their own families. As a consequence, mothers may be more aware of sexual behaviors in their
children and feel more comfortable in responding to them. Mothers may also be more likely than fathers to provide their children with accurate information about sexual topics.

Still another factor which may influence parents' sex education practices is their past learning about the "double standard" of adult sexuality. This double standard contrasts the traditionally passive female and the traditionally active male role in sexual relations. Females are expected to display more modesty, adhere to stricter chastity, and convey more sexually conservative attitudes. Males are permitted or expected to embrace a more active sex life, participate in more exploration of sexual behaviors, and possess more liberal sexual attitudes (Wilson, Strong, Clarke, and Johns, 1977). It is likely that parents in the 25-35 year age group were socialized to exhibit behaviors consistent with this double standard. If these parents model their parents' practices, they may respond differentially to their sons' and daughters' sexual questions and behaviors. Specifically, parents may be more strict and less comfortable in responding to their daughters' displays of overt sexual behaviors than their sons'.

Review of Literature

Sexuality and Sexual Learning

A great deal of information about human sexuality is acquired between the ages of two and five (Reiss, 1967; McNab, 1976). A preschool child faces the task of learning about genital differences between the sexes, birth and reproduction, sexual or obscene language, and behaviors which enhance bodily pleasures. Parents are the primary
sex educators for young children. Their methods of sex education often take the form of training, including regulation or restriction of the child's sexual behaviors.

Children's curiosity about various sexual topics is often expressed in the form of questions. Many parents await the child's questions before they give any sexual information (Bloch, 1978). Typically, the first questions to arise are those which deal with the topic of differences between the sexes such as "Why does he have one of those and I don't?" or "Why do mommys and daddys look different?" These questions are generally followed by curiosity about birth and reproduction. Children ask such questions as "Where does the baby come from?" or "How did it get in there?" and "How will it get out?"

In addition to asking sex-related questions, preschool children display a range of sexual behaviors. One such behavior is genital play or masturbation. Masturbation may be defined as manual touching or handling of the genitals, or rubbing the genitals against an object. A second behavior, social sex play, may include exploring the bodies of children of the same or opposite sex, or attempting to place objects in a child's body openings. Such behaviors often occur in games of "doctor" or "house." A third behavior is the use of obscene words or other sexual language.

Previous studies have examined children's expressions of sexual curiosity and behavior. For example, Hattendorf (1932) surveyed 1800 lower and middle class parents about sexual questions asked by their young children and the age at which they generally appeared. Results revealed that sexual questions generally began at age three and reached
a peak at age five. Specific areas of sexual curiosity included the origin of babies, the process of birth, functions of the body, and physical sex differences.

Other previous studies (Conn, 1939, 1940a, 1940b, 1947, 1951; Sears, Maccoby, and Levin, 1957) have investigated parental responses to children's sexual behaviors and questions. In one investigation of lower and middle class mothers of preschool children, Sears et al. (1957) established common categories of parental responses to masturbation and sex play. One category was the use of negative sanctions, or telling the child to stop the behavior because it was wrong. A second method of responding to sexual curiosity was to distract the child's attention from the behavior. A third category of responses, mislabeling, included the use of infantile expressions or words in the place of accurate anatomical or sexual terminology. A fourth method was to simply ignore the behavior. A fifth and final category revealed in this study included answering children's questions factually, correctly labeling genital parts and functions, and acknowledging sexual behaviors and feelings. In a later survey of parents' sex education practices, Gagnon (1965) also found that the above categories represented the most common modes of response to sexual curiosity.

Differential Socialization Practices

In an effort to develop a more comprehensive model of parental sex education practices, studies have also investigated the differential socialization methods of mothers and fathers. A review of literature yields three studies which examined how mothers and/or fathers educate
their sons and daughters about sexuality. An early study by Sears et al. (1957) examined three areas of sexual behavior: modesty, masturbation, and social sex play. Interviews were conducted with lower and middle class mothers of five-year-old boys and girls. This study included three major goals: 1) examining maternal permissiveness of the child's uninhibited displays of sexual behaviors; 2) identifying maternal training methods; and 3) determining the amount of punishment or pressure applied to sons and daughters to change behaviors. A great deal of descriptive evidence was provided by the study including: the range of mothers' attitudes towards sexual behaviors, mothers' responses to sexual behaviors, and mothers' techniques for controlling modesty, masturbation, and social sex play. Mothers were ranked by interview responses according to the permissiveness of their attitudes and the severity of pressure they exerted in controlling sexual behaviors.

Results of the previous study indicated that a majority of mothers carefully controlled the child's modesty. However, generally only mild pressure was exerted and rarely was punishment used. Parents did not make an issue of nudity, but inconspicuously corrected children or diverted their attention. Mothers proved far less permissive towards masturbation and made conscious attempts to curtail it. Distraction, removal of the child's hand, and simply asking the child to stop were the most frequently used techniques. Again, little verbal scolding or physical punishment was used in teaching the child to refrain from masturbation. Finally, the study revealed that maternal responses to social sex play varied widely. A majority of mothers communicated to their children that sex play was not permissible. Although they actively
attempted to discourage the behavior, severe punishment or scolding was rarely used. Other mothers reported attempting to distract children engaged in sex play. Efforts were also made to eliminate situations where social sex play might occur.

Generally the permissiveness of the mothers in one area of sex behavior was positively related to her permissiveness in other areas. However, the pressure mothers exerted to control behavior in one area was less strongly related to pressure in the others. Girls and boys were found to be treated in much the same manner in the sphere of sex training. Indeed, the investigators' hypothesis that mothers would be more restrictive with girls in the areas of modesty training, masturbation, and social sex play was not supported.

A second study by Sears, Rau, and Alpert (1965) followed much the same format as the earlier research of Sears et al. (1957). One significant methodological difference was that both mothers and fathers of four-year-old children were interviewed. The subjects were parents of 40 children enrolled in the Stanford Village Nursery School. Twenty-one of the fathers were classified as professionals, seven held managerial positions, and twelve were students. Questions were asked concerning attitudes and responses to modesty, masturbation, and social sex play, as well as the child's knowledge of birth and reproduction. Mothers were also questioned concerning their sex education experiences, although fathers were not.

Results of the latter study were much the same as those in the earlier research by Sears et al. (1957). There were no differences in maternal and paternal permissiveness towards hypothetical sexual
behaviors in boys and girls for each area of sexual expression. Unfortunately, the study did not analyze and discuss differences in mothers' and fathers' actual responses to children's sexual behaviors. As in the previous study, the researchers failed to examine parental responses to children's questions about genital differences and birth and reproduction.

A final study by Newson and Newson (1968) attempted to investigate parent-child relationships in a developmental sequence. The investigators aimed to compile an accurate picture of the child's sexual behavior during successive developmental stages. Mothers of four-year-old children in the urban community of Nottingham, England were interviewed in their homes. About 27% of the families were considered upper-middle to middle class, while 73% were classified working class. Interview questions involved the topics of masturbation, modesty, humor and ribaldry related to sex interest, and knowledge of birth and reproduction.

Results of the English study indicated that only 17% of the mothers had observed genital play. However, fully 90% of the total population reported that they would discourage such behavior. Half of these mothers would use punishment to control the behavior. The majority of mothers took a less severe attitude toward bathroom humor, such as giggling or teasing about genital differences. There were wide differences in mothers' approaches to the dissemination of birth and reproductive information. About 46% of the mothers reported that they would not tell their child the basic facts of reproduction. Approximately 20% reported that their child already knew the basic facts, and 34%
responded that they would willingly inform their child about reproduction if they were asked.

The Newsons' study also indicated significant differences between social classes for each aspect of sexual behavior. The upper-middle and middle class parents were more likely to view children's curiosity about their bodies, genital play, and anatomical questions as natural and healthy. They believed questions should be answered calmly and frankly as they arose. The report further suggested that there were no differences in maternal responses to sons' and daughters' behaviors.

Other studies on parents' sex education strategies have asked older children to indicate which parent was more responsible for providing them with sexual information. Mothers were reported to assume primary responsibility for sons' and daughters' sex education in childhood, as well as the responsibility for daughters' sex education in adolescence. Fathers took over the majority of parental responsibility for sons' sex education beginning in preadolescence (Finkel and Finkel, 1975). A recent study conducted by Robers, Kline, and Gagnon (1978) with a representative sample of Cleveland parents suggested several explanations for these conclusions. A major consideration is that children generally spend more time with their mothers than fathers. Thus, mothers are more readily accessible when questions arise. Secondly, many mothers tend to be more affectionate and emotionally expressive than fathers. According to the researchers, children may be more likely to ask questions regarding love and affection of the parent who most closely symbolizes these aspects of sexuality. Finally, children may view their mothers as more understanding and accepting and feel more comfort
in questioning them.

While the results of the previous research are interesting, there is a clear need for further empirical research on parents' sexual socialization practices. Since the major studies reported were conducted from eleven to twenty-two years ago, societal changes may have contributed to changes in parents' sex education practices. Whether or not the increased prevalence of sex education materials (Gordon, 1976) and the adoption of more liberal sex attitudes (Calderone, 1976) have contributed to changes in parental sex education practices has yet to be determined.

A second need is to question both mothers and fathers concerning their sex education practices. Only one major study (Sears et al., 1965) has included fathers and these fathers were members of a very liberal college community. The study also failed to compare maternal and paternal responses to children's sexual behaviors.

A third need is to examine parents' responses to a wide range of sexual behaviors. Previous studies have generally limited their focus to three behaviors and have presented little data on parents' reactions to questions about birth and reproduction or genital differences. Specifically, it appears important to examine current parental responses to such issues as genital differences, birth and reproduction, masturbation, sex play, and use of sexual or obscene words.

One final issue which needs to be systematically investigated is the parents' comfort in dealing with specific sexual behaviors. Such knowledge may improve our understanding of why preschool parents choose to discuss some topics, but not others.
Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the sex education practices of parents of preschool children. Specifically, the study sought to collect descriptive data on current sexual socialization practices of parents, and to determine if sexual socialization practices differ as a function of sex of parent and sex of child. The study examined 1) the frequency of parents' observation of children's sexual questions and behaviors, 2) parents' responses to sexual questions and behaviors, and 3) parental comfort in dealing with five areas of sexual behavior: curiosity about genital differences, curiosity about birth and reproduction, use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play. A comparison was made of the sex education process in four parent-child dyads: mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son.

On the basis of theory and previous research, three hypotheses were formulated. First, it was hypothesized that mothers would be more likely than fathers to observe sexual behavior in children of both sexes. A second hypothesis was that mothers would respond with more factual, complete information to questions about genital differences and birth and reproduction than fathers. Finally, it was predicted that parents would feel less comfortable and use more negative sanctions in responding to sexual behaviors of daughters than sons.
METHOD

Subjects

One hundred and twenty-eight parents of preschool children participated in this study. The sample consisted of thirty-seven mothers of daughters, thirty-seven mothers of sons, twenty-seven fathers of daughters, and twenty-seven fathers of sons. All subjects were currently married, with children between the ages of three and five. The children were enrolled in the Oregon State University Family Life Department's Child Development Laboratories and other early childhood programs in Corvallis, Oregon. The subjects were all Caucasian and were classified as middle or upper-middle class (Levels 1-3) on Hollingshead's Two Factor Index of Social Position (1957).

Instrument

An extensive sex education questionnaire (Koblinsky and Atkinson, 1978) for parents of preschool children was used in this study. This questionnaire assesses parental attitudes towards sex education, responses to children's sexual behavior, and future plans for children's sex education. Biographical information about parents was also obtained through questions about parents' sex, social class, race, and marital status. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

The data used for this particular study consisted of parental responses in each of five sexual areas: genital differences, birth and reproduction, use of obscene or sexual words, masturbation, and social sex play. In each area parents were asked a question about 1) the
frequency with which they observed each behavior or question within the last six months; 2) their response to the child's question or behavior; and 3) the level of comfort they experienced in responding to the question or behavior. Questions dealing with the category of genital differences are 18, 19, and 20; with birth and reproduction, 26, 27, and 28; with the use of obscene words, 48, 49, and 50; with masturbation, 54, 55, and 56; and with social sex play, 61, 62, and 63.

In responding to questions about the frequency of sexual behaviors, parents were asked to check one of six alternatives ranging from "daily" (1) to "never occurs" (6). This procedure is illustrated below:

In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often you have discussed or answered your child's questions about reproduction or birth?

- daily
- several times a week
- once a week
- several times a month
- once a month or less
- not at all

Questions about comfort likewise required parents to check off one of six alternatives ranging from "totally comfortable" (1) to "totally uncomfortable" (6). This procedure is illustrated below:

How comfortable have you felt in discussing reproduction and birth with your child?

- totally comfortable
- mostly comfortable
- tended to be comfortable
- tended to be uncomfortable
- mostly uncomfortable
- totally uncomfortable

Questions dealing with parental responses to children's questions and behaviors required open-ended answers. An example of this type of question is given below:
What was your response to your child's questions about birth and reproduction (i.e., how did you actually answer your child's question)?

Content validity for the sex education questionnaire was determined by submitting it for review by one staff member of the Survey Research Center and four Family Life Department faculty members. Faculty were asked whether each item was appropriate for measuring either parental observation, response, or comfort in dealing with sexual behaviors and questions. It was concluded that the items were appropriate for measuring parents' awareness of children's sexuality and their sex education practices.

**Procedure**

Parents in the Oregon State University Child Development Laboratories and other early childhood centers in Corvallis were given a packet including a letter of introduction and a sex education questionnaire. The parent letter, which may be found in Appendix B, explained the general purpose of the study and noted that participation was entirely voluntary. It also emphasized the importance of honesty in responding to the questions. Spouses were asked to fill out questionnaires individually and to leave their names off the questionnaire. Boxes were provided in the children's early childhood center for return of the questionnaires. In an attempt to increase response rate, parents were asked to check their names off a list when they had completed the questionnaire.

The return rates for questionnaires were 76% for mothers and 68% for fathers. Questionnaires from respondents not meeting the subject
selection criteria (Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class, currently married) were eliminated. Respondents meeting the criteria were retained and broken into four groups: mothers of daughters, mothers of sons, fathers of daughters, and fathers of sons. The experimenter then coded parental responses to items dealing with frequency, comfort, and nature of response in five areas: genital differences, birth and reproduction, use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play.

All questionnaires were independently coded by a second individual. The percentage of agreement between coders' responses in each of the five behavioral areas was as follows: questions about genital differences, 98.6%; questions about birth and reproduction, 99.2%; use of obscene words, 98.6%; masturbation, 99.2%; and sex play, 99.2%.
RESULTS

Percentage of Parents Who Observed Sexual Questions and Behaviors

Table 1 summarizes the percentage of parents who reported observing each of the five sexual behaviors on at least one occasion. These behaviors included asking questions about genital differences, asking questions about birth and reproduction, using obscene words, masturbating, and engaging in sex play.

As shown in the table, parents were more likely to have encountered questions about genital differences than any other behavior. About 84% of the sample had encountered genital curiosity, with mothers (88%) reporting more questions concerning genital differences than fathers (78%). A comparison of responses in the four parent-child dyads reveals that mothers of daughters (95%) were most likely to have been questioned about genital differences between the sexes.

About three quarters of the present sample had been questioned about birth and reproduction. Overall, more fathers (78%) reported encountering curiosity about reproduction than mothers (71%). However an examination of responses in the four dyads shows that mothers of daughters (84%) were most likely to have encountered questions about reproduction. Equal percentages of fathers of sons and daughters (78%) reported that their children had questioned them about birth and reproduction. Interestingly,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 37)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 37)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 27)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 27)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 128)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions About Genital Differences</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions About Birth and Reproduction</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Obscene Words</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbation</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Play</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mothers of sons (59%) were the least likely of the four groups of parents to have encountered curiosity about reproduction.

Of the three types of sexual behavior under investigation (use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play), parents were most likely to have encountered masturbation (69%). More mothers (74%) than fathers (61%) reported encountering this behavior. Moreover, mothers of sons (81%) were the parent group most likely to have observed masturbation. Fathers of daughters (48%) were the least likely to have encountered this behavior.

Approximately half of all parents surveyed in the study had observed their child using obscene words. A greater percentage of fathers (54%) than mothers (47%) reported that their children used such language. Fathers of sons (56%) were most likely to encounter this behavior, while mothers of sons (46%) were the least likely.

Overall, parents (23%) were less likely to have observed sex play than any of the four remaining sexual behaviors. Mothers (26%) were more likely than fathers (18%) to report their child engaging in sex play. As with observations in the area of masturbation, fathers of daughters (15%) were least likely to have encountered sex play. Mothers of daughters (30%) were the most likely to have observed this behavior.

It was originally predicted that mothers would be more likely to observe sexual behaviors than fathers. A chi square analysis was performed to determine if there were significant differences in mothers' and fathers' observations of each behavior. To simplify analyses in each area, two response categories were used: had encountered the behavior and
had not encountered the behavior. A second chi square analysis was also performed to determine if there were significant differences in the frequency with which parents observed each sexual behavior in sons and daughters.

Contrary to predictions, mothers were no more likely than fathers to have encountered questions about body differences, \( \chi^2(1) = 1.03, \text{n.s.} \) Furthermore, there were no significant differences in parents of daughters' and parents of sons' observations of questions about genital differences, \( \chi^2(1) = .54, \text{n.s.} \)

Chi square analyses of parents' observations of reproductive curiosity also revealed that mothers were no more likely than fathers to encounter questions about reproduction and birth, \( \chi^2(1) = .34, \text{n.s.} \) Moreover, there were no significant differences between parents of sons' and parents of daughters' observations of reproductive curiosity, \( \chi^2(1) = 2.62, \text{n.s.} \)

As in the areas of curiosity about genital differences and birth and reproduction, mothers were no more likely than fathers to have encountered their child using obscene words, \( \chi^2(1) = .28, \text{n.s.} \) A comparison of parents of sons and parents of daughters revealed no significant differences in the frequency of encountering obscene words, \( \chi^2(1) = .80, \text{n.s.} \)

Chi square analyses of parental observations of masturbation likewise show that mothers were no more likely than fathers to have encountered masturbation, \( \chi^2(1) = 1.96, \text{n.s.} \) However, parents of sons were significantly more likely than parents of daughters to have encountered masturbation, \( \chi^2(1) = 4.4, p < .05. \)
In the area of sex play, there were no significant differences found between mothers' and fathers' observations of this behavior, $\chi^2(1) = .54$, n.s. Furthermore, parents of sons were no more likely than parents of daughters to encounter their child engaging in sex play, $\chi^2(1) = 0$, n.s.

In summary, the current results failed to support the prediction that mothers would be more likely than fathers to observe sexual behaviors in their children. There were no significant differences in mothers' and fathers' likelihood of encountering questions about genital differences, questions about birth and reproduction, use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play on at least one occasion.

**Frequency of Parental Observations of Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors**

The frequency of parental observations of children's sexuality was assessed by asking how frequently in the last six months parents had encountered a particular question or behavior. To simplify presentation of the data, the original six alternative responses (daily, several times a week, several times a month, once a month or less, and never occurs) were condensed into the four categories of: daily, one to six times per week, three times a month or less, and never occurs. In other words, the experimenter combined the alternatives of once and several times a week to form a category of one to six times per week. The alternatives several times a month and once a month or less were combined to form the category three times a month or less. Table 2 illustrates the frequency with which parents encountered children's sexual questions or behaviors.
Questions About Genital Differences

Part A of Table 2 summarizes the frequency with which parents encountered children's questions about genital differences. The largest percentage of parents in all parent-child dyads (59%) encountered questions about genital differences three times per month or less. Moreover, a notable percentage of parents (24%) were questioned about genital differences one to six times per week.

Questions About Birth and Reproduction

The frequency with which parents encountered children's questions about reproduction and birth is illustrated in Table 2, Part B. As with questions about genital differences, the largest percentage of parents (63%) reported encountering questions about reproduction and birth three times a month or less. More mothers (14%) than fathers (6%) observed these questions one to six times a week. Moreover, a significant percentage of parents (26%) had not yet encountered any questions about birth and reproduction.

Use of Obscene Words

Table 2, Part C summarizes the frequency with which parents encountered their children using obscene words. No fathers and only a small percentage of mothers (4%) observed this behavior on a daily basis. A relatively small percentage of parents (12%) encountered obscene language
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Total Parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Questions About Genital Differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 6 times per week</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times per month or less</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior never occurs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Questions About Birth and Reproduction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 6 times per week</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times per month or less</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior never occurs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Total Parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. Use of Obscene Words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 6 times per week</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times per month or less</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior never occurs</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Masturbation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 6 times per week</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times per month or less</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior never occurs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (%)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (%)</th>
<th>Total Parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 6 times per week</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 times per month or less</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior never occurs</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
once or more per week. A larger number (36%) encountered it several
times per month. Interestingly, for the frequency one to six times
per week, parents of sons (16%) were about twice as likely to encounter
the use of obscene words as parents of daughter's (8%). About half of
the parents reported that their child had never used obscene words.

Masturbation

Table 2, Part D illustrates that parents encountered masturbation
more frequently than questions about genital differences, questions
about birth and reproduction, and the use of obscene words. About 26%
of the parents had encountered masturbation one to six times per week.
Moreover, parents of sons (36%) were more likely than parents of daugh-
ters (16%) to have observed this behavior several times a week. Of the
four parent-child dyads, fathers of sons (44%) were most likely to have
observed masturbation one to six times per week, and fathers of daughters
were least likely to have observed the behavior with this frequency.
More mothers (39%) than fathers (30%) encountered masturbation three
times a month or less.

Sex Play

Of all the sexual behaviors investigated, sex play was encountered
least frequently. Table 2, Part E illustrates that no parent reported
encountering sex play more than three times per month. At the frequency
level of three times per month or less, mothers (26%) were more likely
to have observed sex play than fathers (18%). A comparison of responses
in the four parent-child dyads revealed that mothers of daughters (30%)
were most likely to have encountered sex play, and fathers of daughters
Parental Responses to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors

Parental responses to children's sexuality were assessed by asking parents to explain how they answered their children's questions about genital differences and birth/reproduction, or to describe how they generally responded to their child's use of obscene words, masturbation, or sex play. After questionnaires were returned, categories of responses were formulated using the response categories from previous studies as a starting point (Conn, 1939, 1940a, 1940b, 1947, 1951; Sears et al., 1957). Tables 3 through 7 summarize the percentage of parents who used each category of response to respond to the five sexual behaviors. In each table, percentages are based on the responses of parents who had encountered each behavior. Parents who had never encountered the behavior are not considered. Table 1 may be consulted to review the percentage of parents who reported observing each behavior.

Genital Differences

The categories of response to children's questions about genital differences included parental explanations that 1) "boys and girls are different"; 2) "boys have a penis, and girls don't"; and 3) "boys have a penis and girls have a vagina." A final category was used for ambiguous or other responses. An example of an ambiguous response was, "Using appropriate terms for the age of my child."

The percentage of parents who gave each of these explanations is
presented in Table 3. This table illustrates that the largest percentage of parents (42%) used the response "boys have a penis and girls have a vagina" when explaining genital differences. Overall, mothers (48%) were more likely to use this explanation than fathers (30%). Interestingly, mothers of daughters (61%) were most likely to use this response and fathers of sons (20%) were the least likely. Parents used this response more with daughters (53%) than with sons (31%). Conversely, the response "boys have a penis and girls don't" was used more with sons (29%) than daughters (11%). Fathers of daughters (50%) were more likely than any other group to explain genital differences with the response that "boys and girls are different."

---------------------
Insert Table 3 about here
---------------------

It was originally hypothesized that mothers would be more likely than fathers to use factual information in responding to questions about genital differences. To examine differences in maternal and paternal responses, categories were combined to form two broad areas of response: more factual physiological information (boys have a penis and girls have a vagina); and less factual information (boys and girls are different, and boys have a penis and girls don't). Chi square analyses were performed to determine if there were significant differences in mothers' and fathers' provision of more factual information. Contrary to predictions, results revealed that mothers were no more likely to respond to their child's curiosity about genital differences with more factual physiological information than fathers, $\chi^2(1) = 0$, n.s. A second chi
### TABLE 3
Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response to Answer Questions About Genital Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 28)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 30)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 17)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 13)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 105)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys and Girls are Different</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys Have a Penis, Girls Don't</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys Have a Penis, Girls Have a Vagina</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Response</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
square analysis was used to test for differences in the nature of responses given to sons and daughters. Parents of daughters were significantly more likely than parents of sons to respond to curiosity about genital differences with factual physiological information, $\chi^2(1) = 6.1, p < .05$.

**Birth and Reproduction**

In the area of children's questions about birth and reproduction, a wider range of parental responses was obtained. The most common response categories for children's questions about where babies come from included: 1) "from the mommy's tummy"; 2) "from the mommy's uterus"; 3) "from a sperm and an egg, or a seed"; 4) "from a sperm and egg, or seed, as a result of intercourse"; and 5) religious explanations such as, "The baby comes from God in Heaven." Also included was an ambiguous response category for such explanations as, "The facts of birth and reproduction were explained in a matter-of-fact way."

Table 4 shows the percentage of parents who responded to children's questions about birth and reproduction in each manner. From the table it can be seen that the most common response parents gave in answering questions about birth and reproduction was that "the baby comes from mommy's tummy" (46%). More fathers (54%) used this mode of response than mothers (41%). A higher percentage of mothers (19%) than fathers (9%) mentioned the sperm, egg, and/or seed when discussing birth and reproduction. Moreover, only mothers (9%) mentioned intercourse when providing an explanation about the origin of babies. About 13% of mothers of daughters mentioned intercourse, while only 4% of mothers of sons did so. Similar
percentages of mothers (11%) and fathers (9%) used religious explanations. Of all four parent-child groups, mothers of sons (21%) were the most likely to use a religious explanation when faced with questions about birth and reproduction.

------------------------

Insert Table 4 about here

------------------------

It was originally hypothesized that mothers would be more likely than fathers to use factual information in responding to questions about birth and reproduction. To test for differences in parental reactions to children's curiosity about reproduction and birth, responses were combined to form two categories: more factual physiological information (baby comes from mommy's uterus; baby comes from a sperm, egg, and/or seed; baby comes from a sperm, egg, and/or seed, as a result of intercourse); and less factual information (baby comes from mommy's tummy, and religious explanations). Results of a chi square analysis revealed that, contrary to predictions, there were no significant differences in mothers' and fathers' use of factual information to answer children's questions about birth and reproduction, \( \chi^2(1) = 1.44 \), n.s. A second chi square analysis by sex of child also revealed that parents of sons and parents of daughters failed to differ in terms of their use of more factual responses to children's questions, \( \chi^2(1) = .01 \), n.s.

Use of Obscene Words

Parental responses to children's use of obscene words were classified as belonging to one of six common categories. This same set of
### TABLE 4

Percentage of Parents Using Each Mode of Response to Answer Questions About Birth and Reproduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 30)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 24)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 19)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 16)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 89)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baby Comes From Mommy's Tummy</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Comes From Mommy's Uterus</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Comes From Sperm, Egg, and/or Seed</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Comes From Sperm, Egg, and/or Seed, as a Result of Intercourse</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Explanation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Response</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CA:...
categories was also applicable for masturbation and sex play.

The first common category of response was the accepting remark. An example of an accepting response to a child's use of obscene words is a statement such as, "Let me tell you what that word means."

A second common parental response to children's use of obscene words was to ignore the behavior. In this situation, the parents responded neither verbally nor nonverbally to the behavior.

Distracting the child's attention from the use of obscene words was a third category of parental response. Parents who displayed this mode of response reported remarks such as, "Let's come play over here instead of using that word."

A fourth mode of parental response to the use of obscene words was the social sanction. One parent using the social sanction told his child, "It's OK for you to say that word at home, but some people don't think it's nice, so you shouldn't say it in public."

A fifth means of response, the negative statement included remarks such as, "That's a naughty word, don't say it."

All ambiguous responses were incorporated into a sixth and final category. An example of an ambiguous response was, "When my child says an obscene word, I tell her what I think of it."

Table 5 illustrates the percentage of parents using each mode of response when their child used obscene words. The table shows that mothers of daughters (18%) were about three times more likely than any of the other groups of parents to respond to the use of obscene words with an accepting remark. Slightly more fathers (26%) than mothers (23%)
ignored the obscene language of their children. However, in looking at the four parent-child groups, fathers of sons (39%) were most likely to ignore the behavior, and fathers of daughters (13%) were the least likely to do so. No parents used the distracting response when dealing with their child's use of obscene words. About a fifth of all parents (22%) used the social sanction when encountering the use of obscene language. Interestingly, the largest percentage of parents in the sample (43%) responded to the use of obscene words with a negative sanction. Of these parents, more mothers of sons (52%) and fathers of daughters (53%) reported using the negative sanction.

----------------- Insert Table 5 about here -----------------

It was originally hypothesized that parents would be more likely to use negative sanctions in responding to the sexual behaviors of daughters than sons. In order to test for differences in parents' use of negative sanctions in response to obscene language, responses were combined to form two general categories: negative sanctions, and all other responses (accepting remark, ignoring behavior, distraction, social sanction, and other responses). Chi square analyses were performed for sex of child and sex of parent. Contrary to predictions, parents of daughters were no more likely than parents of sons to use the negative sanction when encountering their child using obscene language, $X^2(1) = .08$, n.s. In addition there were no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' use of negative sanctions when responding to their child's use of obscene words, $X^2(1) = 0$, n.s.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 22)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 21)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 15)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 18)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 76)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Remark</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distract</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sanction</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Sanction</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Masturbation

The categories of parental responses to masturbation closely parallel those in the area of obscene words. The category of accepting remarks for the area of masturbation included responses such as "That feels good, doesn't it?" and "I know you enjoy that." The second category, ignoring behavior, included verbal and nonverbal lack of recognition of the child's masturbation. The third category of responses, distraction, included such remarks as, "Here's a toy you can play with," or "Time to go to sleep now." Parents also reported using nonverbal strategies to distract their child, such as simply handing him/her a toy.

A fourth method parents used in responding to the child's masturbation was the social sanction. A parent using this mode might say, "It's OK for you to touch yourself on your penis at home, but some people don't think that's polite, so you shouldn't do it in public." A fifth mode of response, the negative sanction was defined as a statement suggesting that masturbation was bad or dirty. An example of such a response was, "Don't do that, that's dirty." The final category for ambiguous responses included such remarks as, "I respond like any parent would."

Table 6 summarizes the percentage of parents using each mode of response when they encountered their child masturbating. This table illustrates that only mothers reported using accepting remarks in response to masturbation (9%). Moreover, more mothers of daughters (12%) than mothers of sons (6%) used the accepting remark. The most common response to preschool children's masturbation was to ignore the behavior. Almost half of all parents (49%) in the sample ignored their child's
masturbation. The techniques of distraction and social sanction (giving a social reason for refraining from the behavior) were used about equally by mothers and fathers. An examination of the negative sanction category reveals that fathers (22%) were more likely to use the negative sanction than mothers (17%). Fathers of daughters were the most likely to use the negative sanction (29%)

----------------------

Insert Table 6 about here

----------------------

A chi square analysis for sex of child was performed to test the hypothesis that parents would be more likely to use negative sanctions in responding to masturbation in daughters than sons. In order to perform chi square analyses, two broad groups of responses were formed: negative sanctions, and all other responses. Significant differences between parents of sons' and parents of daughters' use of negative sanctions in response to their child's masturbation failed to appear, $X^2(1) = 0$, n.s. A chi square analysis by sex of parent also revealed that mothers were no more likely than fathers to use a negative sanction when they observed their child masturbating, $X^2(1) = .04$, n.s.

Sex Play

Parental responses to children's sex play fell into the same general categories as parental responses to the use of obscene words and masturbation. Again, the first common category of responses was the accepting remark. In the case of sex play, an example of an accepting remark was, "You're curious about each other's bodies, aren't you?" The second
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 26)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 32)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 14)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 24)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 96)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Remark</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distract</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sanction</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Sanction</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Response</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
category, ignoring the behavior, simply meant that parents neither verbally, nor nonverbally, acknowledged their child's sex play. The third category of responses, distraction, included such remarks as, "Let's come over here and play instead of doing that" or "You can look in each other's mouths instead."

A fourth category of response, the social sanction, incorporated such remarks as, "It's alright for you to look at each other, but other people may not think it's very nice." The fifth mode or response, the negative sanction, was displayed by parents who made such comments as, "That's bad, don't do it." The sixth and final category, ambiguous responses, included such comments as, "I responded to the sex play in a general way."

Table 7 gives the percentage of parents using each mode of response when their child engaged in sex play. Some caution must be used in interpreting the results since only about 23% of the parents in this study had encountered sex play. The table shows that only mothers of daughters (19%) and fathers of sons (14%) reported using an accepting remark when encountering sex play. Fathers (45%) were much more likely than mothers (10%) to ignore sex play. Mothers of sons (25%) and fathers of daughters (25%) were more likely to use distracting strategies than the two other parent groups. About 24% of mothers of sons and daughters used the social sanction. No fathers of daughters used this technique. Finally, the table indicates that almost a fifth of mothers used the negative sanction in responding to sex play of children of both sexes. About a quarter of fathers of daughters used this response, but no fathers of sons used the negative sanction in responding to their child's sex play.
In order to test the hypothesis that parents would use more negative sanctions in responding to daughters' sex play than sons', two broad categories of response were again used: negative sanctions, and all other responses. Contrary to predictions, there were no significant differences between parents of sons' and parents of daughters' use of negative sanctions when encountering this behavior, $X^2(1) = .09$, n.s. A chi square analysis by sex of parent also revealed that mothers were no more likely than fathers to respond to their child's sex play using the negative sanction, $X^2(1) = .006$, n.s.

Parental Comfort in Responding to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors

Parental comfort in dealing with children's sexuality was assessed by asking parents to indicate how comfortable they felt when they encountered each of the five sexual behaviors. There were six alternative categories of parental responses ranging from totally comfortable (1) to totally uncomfortable (6).

Table 8 summarized the mean comfort levels experienced by the four parent groups when they encountered each category of sexual behavior. The table shows that, of the five behaviors investigated, parents felt most comfortable ($M = 1.64$) discussing questions about birth and reproduction and least comfortable ($M = 2.65$) in responding to children's sex
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters (N = 16)</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons (N = 12)</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters (N = 4)</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons (N = 7)</th>
<th>Total Parents (N = 39)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Remark</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distract</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sanction</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Sanction</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Response</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
play. It is interesting that for all parent groups, the lowest mean comfort level is approximately three, or "tend to be comfortable."

It was originally hypothesized that parents of sons would feel more comfortable responding to obscene language, masturbation, and sex play than parents of daughters. An examination of Table 8 reveals that mean scores are in the predicted direction, with parents of sons expressing more comfort in responding to these behaviors than parents of daughters. In addition, mean scores reveal that mothers felt more comfortable in responding to all five sexual behaviors than fathers. It is interesting to note that of the four parent-child dyads, fathers of daughters experienced the least amount of comfort in responding to each sexual behavior.

A 2 (sex of parent) X 2 (sex of child) analysis of variance was then performed on parental comfort scores in each of the five areas of sexual behavior. Although mean scores suggest that parents of sons were more comfortable with all sexual behaviors than parents of daughters, there were no significant differences between these two groups' comfort in responding to children's use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play. However, parents of sons expressed significantly more comfort than parents of daughters when discussing the topics of genital differences, $F(1, 114) = 5.682, p< .019$; and birth and reproduction, $F(1, 114) = 11.184, p< .001$. Results did not reveal any significant main effects of sex of parent or any significant interactions.
TABLE 8
Mean Amount of Comfort Experienced by Parents When Encountering
Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Mothers of Daughters</th>
<th>Mothers of Sons</th>
<th>Fathers of Daughters</th>
<th>Fathers of Sons</th>
<th>Total Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions About Genital Differences</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions About Birth and Reproduction</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Obscene Words</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbation</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Play</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

Parental Observation of Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors

The current study sought to examine parental awareness of young children's sexual behavior and to explore their sexual socialization practices. Findings indicated that a majority of parents with children between the ages of three and five have encountered questions about genital differences and reproduction, and have observed their child engaging in masturbation. Parents were most likely to have encountered each of these behaviors three times a month or less. The data further reveal that about half of the parents of preschool children have heard their child using obscene language. The majority of these parents reported that their child used obscene words three times a month or less. Finally, it was found that only about a quarter of the parents surveyed had observed their child engaging in sex play. This behavior never occurred more than three times per month.

Overall, the current results are consistent with previous studies which show the preschool years to be characterized by sexual curiosity (Strain, 1948; Bernstein and Cowan, 1975). Moreover, parental observations of sexual behaviors are consistent with the developmental sequence of children's sexual development. Specifically, it was noted that more parents encountered questions about genital differences than the origin of babies. Research reveals that children display curiosity about body differences prior to displaying curiosity about reproduction (Selzer, 1974). The present findings also indicate that parents were more likely
to observe masturbation than sex play. Masturbation has been found to begin as early as infancy (Kinsey et al., 1953), whereas sex play is the most common between the ages of five and seven (Broderick, 1966). The low frequency with which parents in the current study have observed sex play may be a product of the younger age range of their children.

Since mothers have traditionally assumed the major responsibility for child-rearing, it was hypothesized that mothers would be more likely than fathers to observe sexual behaviors in their children. However, there were no significant differences in mothers' and fathers' likelihood of observing each sexual behavior on at least one occasion. Mothers did tend to encounter curiosity about genital differences and reproduction more frequently than fathers. However, the frequency with which mothers and fathers observed the use of obscene words, masturbation, and sex play was very similar. One possible factor contributing to the lack of major differences between mothers' and fathers' observations of sexual behaviors is the middle class fathers' increasing involvement in child-rearing (Lynn, 1974). Expanded coverage of sexuality in current child-rearing manuals (e.g., Spock, 1968) may also contribute to both mothers' and fathers' awareness of sexual behavior in young children.

Although there were no significant differences in mothers' and fathers' observations of sexual behaviors, parents of sons were more likely to encounter one sexual behavior than parents of daughters. Specifically, parents of sons were more likely to observe masturbation than parents of daughters. Previous research suggests two explanations for this finding. First, studies have noted that this behavior is more obvious to parents of sons than daughters because the boys' genitals
are more visible (Newson and Newson, 1968). Secondly, if masturbation is more noticeable in boys than girls, parents may come to expect their sons to masturbate with greater frequency than daughters (Sears et al., 1957). These expectations may result in differential awareness of this behavior in boys and girls.

**Parental Responses to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors**

In response to the absence of studies on preschool parents' sex education strategies in the last ten years, the current study examined parental responses to children's sexual questions and behaviors. The first category of sexual behavior to be investigated was curiosity about genital differences. Results indicated that the most common response to children's questions about body differences between the sexes was that "boys have a penis and girls have a vagina." About 48% of mothers and 30% of fathers responded with this information. Interestingly, results revealed that parents of daughters were significantly more likely to supply a correct term for the female genitalia than parents of sons. It would appear that many parents feel it important to inform daughters that they possess sexual organs unique to their own sex.

The second most common response to genital curiosity, adopted by approximately a fifth of the sample, was that "boys have a penis and girls don't." This response may suggest to children of both sexes that girls are "missing something" (Selzer, 1974). It can be speculated that parents experience more difficulty providing a label for the female genitalia than the male because the female organs are less visible, and
accessible than the male's penis. An additional fifth of the sample in this study responded to questions about genital differences by simply noting that "boys and girls are different." This explanation may reflect parents' discomfort in using appropriate terms for the genitalia of both sexes.

A second sexual behavior examined in this study was children's curiosity about birth and reproduction. Surprisingly, only about a fifth of the parents had explained the reproductive process by examining such concepts as the union of sperm and egg. The most popular response to curiosity about the origin of babies, used by 46% of the sample was that "babies come from the mommy's tummy." Frequent use of this explanation was somewhat surprising in view of the parents' high level of formal education. It may be speculated that many parents underestimate the child's ability to understand the technical aspects of reproduction, such as information about the sperm, egg, and sexual intercourse. Moreover, some parents may experience anxiety in explaining the process of reproduction, especially when children raise questions outside the home. It is no doubt easier to refer to the general location where the baby grows. Interestingly, few parents explained that babies come from the uterus, the organ in which the baby actually develops.

In examining parents' responses to questions about reproduction, it is also interesting to note that about 10% of the parents gave religious explanations. Examples of such responses were that "God put the baby in the mother's stomach" and that "the baby comes from God in Heaven." Such responses may create confusion about the human experience of reproduction, and may suggest that fathers have no role in the conception of the child.
A third sexual behavior examined in this study was obscene language. The most common response to this behavior, adopted by over 40% of the sample, was the negative sanction. Parents using the negative sanction clearly communicated to their children that obscene words were dirty or wrong. Another common response, the social sanction, was reported by a fifth of the sample. This technique was used to inform children that obscene language is offensive and disturbing to other individuals. Use of the negative and social sanctions indicates that parents are very interested in discouraging this behavior at an early age.

Interestingly, only a quarter of the parents in this study chose to ignore children's use of obscene words. This strategy has been recommended by many sex educators in responding to children's experimentation with obscene language (Arnstein, 1976). Indeed, the attention often associated with the negative sanction may actually increase the frequency of the behavior rather than reduce it. None of the parents in the current study used the method of distraction in responding to obscene language.

In view of the traditional double standard of sexuality, it was hypothesized that parents would be more likely to use negative sanctions in responding to obscene language in daughters than sons. However, the results of this study failed to support this hypothesis. In other words, parents did not react more negatively to their preschool daughters' use of obscene words than their sons'. In examining the four parent-child dyads, it was interesting to note that fathers of daughters and mothers of sons were most likely to use the negative sanction. This finding suggests that parents may be more tolerant or understanding of their same-sex child's use of obscene language.
An examination of the fourth topic of investigation, masturbation, revealed that the most common response was to ignore the behavior. Almost half the mothers and fathers reported that they ignored their child when s/he was engaging in masturbation. This finding is consistent with an earlier study involving middle class mothers (Sears et al., 1957) which found that children's masturbation was most commonly ignored. This study also found that distraction was a common response to masturbation, occurring nearly as often as the ignoring technique. However, in the current study only 17% of the parents attempted to distract a child engaged in this behavior. Not surprisingly, the current findings differ from those obtained with lower class mothers who indicated they would punish or actively discourage masturbation (Newson and Newson, 1968).

Although current results suggest that most parents are not fearful about their child's masturbation, it should be noted that a fifth of the sample responded to this behavior with a negative sanction. Sex educators have warned that negative statements about masturbation may communicate that the genitals are "dirty" or "wrong", and may create needless guilt and anxiety in the child.

As in the case of obscene language, it was originally predicted that parents would use more negative sanctions in responding to masturbation in daughters than sons. However, the analysis failed to reveal a double standard in parents' responses to girls' and boys' masturbation. Again, an examination of the four parent-child dyads revealed that mothers of sons and fathers of daughters were most likely to respond negatively to their child's masturbation. As suggested earlier, parents may have more empathy and understanding for their same-sex child's sexual
behavior.

The final sexual behavior examined in this study was sex play. In interpreting results, it must be remembered that only 23% of the parents in the current study had observed their child engaging in this behavior. Of those who had encountered sex play, the most common response was the social sanction. About a quarter of all parents responded by pointing out that the behavior was disturbing to other people. These results differ from those of earlier research (Sear et al., 1957) in which mothers were most likely to report using a negative sanction or distraction in response to their child's sex play. The lesser use of negative sanctions by the current sample may be a result of their exposure to popular child-rearing manuals (e.g., Spock, 1968; Gordon, 1975) which warn against responding negatively to children's sexual behaviors. It might also be noted that the sample of children in the present study was slightly younger than the sample of five-year-olds in the study by Sears et al. (1957). It is possible that parents are less likely to ignore the sex play of older children.

As in the case of obscene language and masturbation, the hypothesis that parents would use more negative sanctions with daughters than with sons was not supported. An examination of responses in the four parent groups reveals that mothers of sons and daughters were equally likely to use negative sanctions, while fathers of daughters were more likely than fathers of sons to respond in this manner. The only parent groups to use the accepting response were mothers of daughters and fathers of sons. Again, there appears to be a tendency for parents to be more tolerant of sexual behavior in their same-sex child.
Overall, parents in all four dyads were most likely to respond to children's sexual behaviors in a neutral or accepting manner, rather than in a negative way. Moreover, contrary to predictions based on the double standard of sexuality, parents were no more likely to respond negatively to their daughters' displays of masturbation, sex play, and obscene language than to their sons'. This absence of differential responses to sons' and daughters' sexual behavior may be especially likely to occur when children are very young. It would be of interest to examine parental responses to sexual expression in boys and girls as they proceed through the middle childhood and preadolescent years.

Parental Comfort in Responding to Children's Sexual Questions and Behaviors

The current data reveal that the majority of parents feel quite comfortable in responding to their children's sexual questions and behaviors. A comparison of comfort experienced in each of the five categories of behavior indicated that parents were most comfortable explaining birth and reproduction, and least comfortable responding to sex play. However, even in the latter area, where parents experienced the least amount of comfort, the mean rating was "tend to be comfortable."

Parents' high level of comfort in responding to sexual behaviors may be related to their high socioeconomic status. Newson and Newson (1968) found that parents in the middle and upper-middle classes were more comfortable than lower class parents in discussing sexual matters with their child. Parents' high level of comfort may also be a product of the relatively easy questions they encounter during their child's
preschool years. Moreover, since this study indicated that many parents are providing their child with only minimal information about sexual topics (e.g., reproduction), it is not surprising that their comfort level should be high.

In view of the double standard of sexuality, it was originally hypothesized that parents would feel more comfortable responding to displays of masturbation, sex play, and obscene language in sons than daughters. Results failed to support this prediction. However, it was found that parents experienced more comfort in explaining genital differences to sons than to daughters. Parents may find it easier to discuss this subject with boys since the penis is more visible and accessible than the female genital organs. Moreover, adults may have difficulty deciding which female organs should be introduced to their child (e.g., vagina, vulva, clitoris, uterus). Parents were also found to experience a greater amount of comfort in discussing reproduction and birth with sons than with daughters. Possibly, parents believe that daughters should be given more detailed information about this subject since they may later bear children. These feelings may create slightly less comfort in discussing this subject with daughters than with sons.

Limitations and Implications

In attempting to generalize from the results of this study, it must be remembered that all parents were Caucasian and classified as middle or upper-middle class. The majority of both mothers and fathers were highly educated, and many were associated with the university. Previous research has suggested that parents in these socioeconomic
classes tend to view children's sexual curiosity as natural and healthy (Newson and Newson, 1968). These attitudes may be reflected in parents' responses to their children's sexual behaviors. Thus, it is not certain that results obtained with this sample would be representative of those obtained with lower socioeconomic classes or other ethnic groups. It is hoped that future research will examine the sex education practices of parents in other populations.

Another interesting variable which might be considered in future studies is the birth order of the child. It is possible that parents feel more anxious about the sexual behavior of their first child. Consequently, they may experience greater difficulty communicating accurate information about sexual issues to first than to later born children. Still another possibility is that parents may rely on older children to provide sex education for their younger siblings.

The current study of sexual socialization practices has implications for professionals involved in parent sex education programs. First, the data suggest a need to help some parents provide their children with a better explanation of genital differences. In particular, parents should be assisted with ways of discussing the female genitalia. Correct terminology for both male and female genitals helps children to learn about human anatomy and also gives them a vocabulary with which to ask sexual questions (Calderone, 1966; Gordon, 1976).

Another finding having implications for sex educators was parents' failure to provide children with a factual description of birth and reproduction. Young children are capable of understanding accurate, albeit simple, information about reproduction, and may be confused by
the explanation that "babies come from the mommy's tummy" (Arnstein, 1976). Thus, there is a need to help parents develop more appropriate answers to their children's questions about reproduction and birth.

In addition to examining responses to children's sexual curiosity, the current study provides information about how parents respond to preschool children's overt sexual behaviors. For example, it was noted that 15-20% of parents responded to masturbation and sex play with a negative sanction, and over 40% of parents responded negatively to children's use of obscene language. Sex educators may help such parents to learn more positive strategies for dealing with masturbation and sex play, as well as more effective methods for reducing the incidence of obscene language. Efforts may also be made to explain how negative reactions to sexual experimentation may have detrimental effects on children's later sexual adjustment.

The present study reveals that children display a range of sexual behaviors during their preschool years. A knowledge of how mothers and fathers respond to those behaviors may assist in the development of more effective sex education programs for today's parents.


Conn, J.H. Children's reactions to the discovery of genital differences.  American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1940a, 10, 747-754.


Hollingshead, S.B. A two factor index of social position. New Haven, Ct., 1957. 11 numbered leaves (mimeographed)


APPENDIX A

Parent Sex Education Questionnaire
**PRESCHOOL PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

First, we'd like to ask you some general questions about discussing sex with children. Please respond to the following items by selecting one of the six possible responses at the right, depending upon how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT</strong></th>
<th><strong>Strongly Agree</strong></th>
<th><strong>Agree Very Much</strong></th>
<th><strong>Agree</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tend to Disagree</strong></th>
<th><strong>Disagree Very Much</strong></th>
<th><strong>Strongly Disagree</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Parents and children should not talk about sex without talking about love at the same time.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

2. Children should know the facts about how they got started and how they were born before the age of five.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

3. A child under age five should have learned the word 'penis' or the word 'vagina'.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

4. Parents should avoid answering most questions about sexuality until their children are in the first grade or older.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

5. If children are told much about sex, they are likely to go too far in experimenting with it.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

6. When parents and preschool children talk about sex, they should talk only about the facts, instead of how they feel.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

7. If parents don't know the answer to a child's question about sex, they should look up the correct answer and report back to the child.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

8. Children should not be scolded for masturbating.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

9. Parents should assume the major responsibility for the sex education of their children.
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE)
II. Now we would like for you to answer some questions based upon your experiences with your preschool child. Please answer all questions as best as your memory will allow. For those questions that clearly do not apply to your situation, write in "doesn't apply" in the answer space.

Children differ somewhat in the age at which they begin to notice differences between males and females.

10. Is your child able to distinguish between males and females?  
   - Yes  
   - No (If no, skip to #15)  
   - Not sure

14. If so, on what basis does your child make this distinction?  
   (check all that apply)  
   - hair length  
   - clothing  
   - genitalia  
   - other (list): 

15. About what age did your child first bring up the subject of genital differences between males and females, if at all?

16. How do you think your child first discovered genital differences (i.e., by seeing parent or sibling, in public restroom, etc.)?

17. How did your child respond to this discovery (i.e., with surprise, disappointment, curiosity, etc.)?

18. In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often you have discussed male-female body differences with your child?  
   - daily  
   - several times a week  
   - once a week  
   - several times a month  
   - once a month or less  
   - not at all

19. Please describe how you have explained genital differences to your child:

20. How comfortable did you feel in discussing this subject?  
   - totally comfortable  
   - mostly comfortable  
   - tended to be comfortable  
   - tended to be uncomfortable  
   - mostly uncomfortable  
   - totally uncomfortable

21. What words does your child use for male genitals?

22. What words does your child use for female genitals?

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE)
As with body differences, children also vary in the age at which they start asking about where babies come from.

23. Has your child ever asked you about where babies come from?
   - Yes
   - No (If no, skip to #27)
   - Not sure

24. About what age were the questions first asked?

25. What circumstances do you think prompted your child to ask the questions?

26. What was your response to your child (i.e., how did you actually answer your child's question)?

27. In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often you have discussed or answered your child's questions about reproduction or birth?
   - Daily
   - Several times a week
   - Once a week
   - Several times a month
   - Once a month or less
   - Not at all

28. How comfortable have you felt in discussing reproduction and birth with your child?
   - Totally comfortable
   - Mostly comfortable
   - Tended to be comfortable
   - Mostly uncomfortable
   - Tended to be uncomfortable
   - Totally uncomfortable

Children also differ in the amount and accuracy of their knowledge about reproduction and birth.

29. Could you summarize your child's present knowledge about where babies come from?

Some children like to run around the house without their clothes on.

30. Does your child ever do this?
   - Yes
   - No (If no, skip to #32)

31. How do you usually respond to your child when this behavior occurs (i.e., what do you actually say and do)?

(Please go on to the next page)
32. Some children prefer to toilet and undress in private. Does your child show any such signs of modesty? 
   Yes
   No (If no, skip to #35)
   Not sure

33. Please give examples of your child’s modesty behaviors and describe the circumstances in which this modesty is most likely to occur:

34. At what age did this modesty behavior first appear?

35. Have you attempted to teach your child about modesty? 
   Yes
   No (If no, skip to #38)

36. Please describe what you have said/done:

37. How comfortable did you feel in talking with your child about modesty? 
   totally comfortable
   mostly comfortable
   tended to be comfortable
   tended to be uncomfortable
   mostly uncomfortable
   totally uncomfortable

38. Do you allow your child to:
   take baths with siblings?
   use the toilet with siblings present?
   use the toilet with friends present?
   see you undressed?
   take baths/showers with you?
   see you use the toilet?
   Yes
   No
   doesn’t apply

39. Children sometimes use “taboo” or “obscene” words and expressions they have heard from other children and adults.

40. Has your child ever used so-called taboo or obscene words? 
   Yes
   No (If no, skip to #51)
   Not sure

41. Please give examples of some of the words used:

42. At about what age did your child first begin to use these words?

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE)
47. Under what circumstances is your child most likely to use these words (i.e., out of anger, with friends, to get attention, etc.)?

48. In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often your child has used taboo or obscene words?

49. How do you generally respond to your child when such words are used (i.e., what do you say and do)?

50. How comfortable do you feel in responding to your child when taboo or obscene words are used?

51. Children sometimes play with their genitals.

52. At about what age did your child first engage in this behavior?

53. Under what circumstances is this behavior most likely to occur (i.e., when the child is tired, bored, etc.)?

54. In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often your child has engaged in genital play?

55. How do you generally respond to your child when he/she engages in this behavior (i.e., what do you say and do)?

56. How comfortable do you feel responding to your child when he/she is engaging in genital play?

(Please go on to the next page)
57. Children sometimes engage in "sex play" with other children, such as exploring each other's bodies, playing "doctor," etc.

Has your child ever engaged in "sex play" with another child? Yes, No (If no, skip to #64), Not sure

58. If so, please give examples:

59. At about what age did your child begin engaging in "sex play"?

60. Under what circumstances is this behavior most likely to occur?

61. In the last six months or so, can you estimate how often your child has engaged in "sex play"?

   - daily
   - several times a week
   - once a week
   - several times a month
   - once a month or less
   - behavior never occurs

62. How do you generally respond to your child when he/she is engaging in "sex play"?

63. How comfortable do you feel responding to your child when he/she is engaging in "sex play" with another child?

   - totally comfortable
   - mostly comfortable
   - tend to be comfortable
   - tend to be uncomfortable
   - mostly uncomfortable
   - totally uncomfortable

64. Parents vary in the types of affection they display in the presence of their children.

What types of affection do you and your spouse typically display in the presence of your preschool child?

   - holding hands
   - casual kissing/hugging
   - verbal expressions of affection
   - other

65. Parents sometimes consult books or other individuals about sex education for their children. They may also use books or other resources to discuss sexuality with preschoolers.

66. Please indicate which of the following sources you have consulted about your child's sex education, if any:

   - child-rearing books
   - sex education books
   - magazine/newspaper columns
   - your parents
   - friends
   - teachers
   - ministers/priests
   - none
   - other
80. Please indicate which of the following resources you have used in discussing sexuality with your child:

- children's books on anatomy
- children's books on reproduction/birth
- pets/animals
- dolls with genitalia
- none
- other

111. In this section, please indicate how comfortable you would feel today if you were to experience each of the following situations with your preschool child. Please indicate how comfortable you'd feel with each behavior by circling one of the six possible responses on the scale, which ranges from "totally comfortable" to "totally uncomfortable."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel...</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>totally comfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mostly comfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tend to be comfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tend to be uncomfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mostly uncomfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>totally uncomfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81. Your preschool child asks you why boys have penises and girls don't.

82. Your preschool child asks you where babies come from.

83. Your preschool child asks you to explain how babies get inside the mother's body.

84. Your preschool child is playing in the sprinklers on the front lawn without any clothes on.

85. Your preschool child asks you the meaning of a "four-letter word" s/he heard at school.

86. Your preschooler uses a "four-letter word" at the dinner table.

87. You discover your preschool child sitting on the couch playing with his/her genitals.

88. You discover your preschool child and a friend playing "doctor" in the bathroom without any clothes on.

89. Your preschool child asks you why you close the door when you and your spouse go to bed.

90. Your preschool child walks into your bedroom when you and your spouse are making love.

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE)
IV. Parents vary greatly in the number and nature of topics which they anticipate discussing with their children. Below is a list of topics which parents may or may not choose to discuss with their children as they grow up.

Please think of the child currently enrolled in our preschool as s/he is growing up and indicate:

1) whether you expect to initiate a discussion about this topic
2) the age at which you expect to initiate discussion
3) how comfortable you expect to feel in discussing this topic

If you do not expect to initiate discussion on a topic, or expect your spouse to assume this responsibility, then ignore sections (2) and (3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Expect to discuss</th>
<th>(2) Age of child when you expect to discuss topic</th>
<th>(3) Level of Comfort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE]
You have finished the major part of the questionnaire, however, we need to know something about your background. Please respond to each of the following items:

136. Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 or over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

137. Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

138. Education (last level completed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>elementary school (grades 1-6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>junior high (grades 7-9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>senior high (10-12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year college graduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advanced degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

139. Have you participated during the last 5 years in a sex education course or program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation Status</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, as a learner or student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, as a leader or teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

140. What is your racial or ethnic identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Identity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian (White)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please describe)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

141. What is your current religious affiliation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please describe)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

142. How often do you attend church?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>once a week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once or twice a month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>several times a year or less</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

143. What is your occupation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

144. What is your spouse's occupation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

145. How many hours per week are you currently employed outside the home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours of Employment per Week</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fewer than 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

146. What is your current marital status?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>never married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separated or divorced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>widowed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>married and living with spouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not married, but living with partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(please go to the next page)
147. Please fill in the ages and sexes of your children: then circle the child in preschool.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How much of your sex education was received from the following sources? Please circle the appropriate response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AMOUNT OF INFORMATION RECEIVED</th>
<th>all of it</th>
<th>much of it</th>
<th>some of it</th>
<th>little of it</th>
<th>none of it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>148. mother</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>149. father</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150. friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151. siblings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152. dating partners</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153. spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154. school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155. church</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156. books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>157. other (please describe)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

158. How comfortable did you feel in discussing sexuality with your parent?
- totally comfortable
- mostly comfortable
- tended to be comfortable
- mostly uncomfortable
- totally uncomfortable
- we didn't discuss sexuality.

159. How satisfactory do you consider your own sex education to have been?
- very satisfactory
- satisfactory
- unsatisfactory
- very unsatisfactory

160. How much did this education increase your knowledge of human sexuality?
- very much
- considerably
- somewhat
- very little
- not at all

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE)
161. How much did this education help you to become more comfortable in talking about human sexuality?
   very much  
   considerably  
   somewhat  
   very little

Family Life Department faculty are in the process of planning a parent education program to help parents respond to the sexual questions and behaviors of their children in the preschool and elementary school years. This program will probably include a series of three 2-hour evening meetings (one per week).

162. If free babysitting were provided for all your children, would you be interested in attending such a program?
   Yes  
   No  
   Uncertain

163. Do you have friends who might be interested in the program?
   Yes  
   No  
   Uncertain

165. Please indicate how many:
   Mothers  
   Fathers

166. Please indicate topics you would like to see discussed in the program.

Thank you for your cooperation. A summary of questionnaire results will be sent to all participating parents.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION!

A SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS WILL BE SENT TO ALL PARTICIPATING PARENTS:

Comments about questionnaire, or other experiences:
APPENDIX B

Parent Letter
Dear Parent:

Preschool parents hold a wide range of ideas about human sexuality and sex education for children. We are conducting a study to learn something about parents' attitudes and experiences in dealing with the sexual question and behaviors of their preschool children. We feel this study is particularly important since researchers have not examined preschool parents' opinions concerning children's sexual behavior and education for almost fifteen years. In addition, the data from this questionnaire will be used to assess the need for establishing a community-based parent sex education program.

We are asking you to participate in this study by filling out the attached questionnaire. Your participation is completely voluntary, and all responses will remain totally anonymous. There is no way that any information can be traced back to you personally once this questionnaire has been completed and returned.

In completing this questionnaire, please answer every question honestly and to the best of your recollection. For personal reasons, a few of the questions may be difficult for some of you to answer. However, we want to assure you that your opinions and experiences—whatever they may be—will be respected and need to be represented. There are no right or wrong answers on this questionnaire. You can contribute most to the success of the study if you take care not to exaggerate or underreport your experiences. Please report your own feelings and your own experiences as you answer each question.

Feel free to make comments on the questionnaire whenever you feel they are needed to clarify your response. We do appreciate your candciness. We are also interested in obtaining responses from both one-parent and two-parent families. However, we request that members of two-parent families complete the questionnaire separately. After you have finished, you may then go back and compare your responses, but please don't change any answers.

Please return the completed questionnaires to the box provided at the preschool, and check your name off the list of parents.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Oregon State University committee which evaluates research involving human subjects. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with either of us, please call us or stop by our offices in Milam Hall. We thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Sally Gentry Koblinsky
Assistant Professor
Family Life Department
3220 Milam Hall
754-4766

Jean Atkinson
Instructor
Family Life Department
307 Milam Hall
754-4765