

Sex Education

My mother, Bernie, confided to me recently about a vow she made as a young mother not to perpetuate the lack of parental communication she experienced as a child—especially about sex. While it may have been Bernie's goal to be more open and honest about the facts of life, that's not how I remember our discussions. I began having periods when I was ten, about the same time John Glenn made his solo orbits around the earth. I knew more about the American space program than about what was happening to my body. To give my mother credit, I don't think she expected the situation to arise for a couple more years, she was blind-sided and unprepared. While she reassured me that I wasn't dying she didn't offer much more information. "Here's the drawer where the sanitary napkins are kept," Mom whispered as she pointed to the bottom of the linen closet. I tried to distinguish shapes in the blackness of the cubby hole. "Where? I don't see anything?" "In back, Honey. Underneath the towels and behind the boxes of Band-Aids. And here's a belt to hold the pads in place." I stood next to her, staring at a thin circle of elastic with metal clips fore and aft. This was unlike any belt I'd seen before. Belts were for strapping on holsters when I played cowboys with the neighborhood kids. The strip of elastic she held looked more like the beginnings of a sling shot. "This is yucky, Mom." "The belt and pad were in place. "I hate this, and my belly hurts." "I know, Dear, but women have to go through this every month so we can have babies." What I retained from this conversation, aside from the knowledge that I had years of yuckiness ahead, was that now I could become a mother. I worried constantly about pregnancy and venereal disease, which I'd read about in *Readers' Digest*. I had no idea what VD was, only that it had to do with sex, and it was undermining American Youth. I also had no idea how a woman got pregnant, but assumed sex was involved with that too. Since I'd begun holding hands with

my fifth-grade boyfriend in the dark basement classroom when we watched films, I was worried, afraid that hand-holding was the link to VD and pregnancy. Mom could have saved me hours of turmoil if she'd mentioned a few specifics about reproduction and the role that men have.

With this dearth of information, I can only speculate that my parents assumed we would learn about sex on the streets or from friends—the same way they did. Of course, they were right. My college dorm floor in the early '70s was a den of sexual experimentation. Or so I learned second-hand from adventurous coeds who delighted in sharing explicit, graphic details of their encounters. Dora, a sophomore with a single room, pushed her twin beds together and covered them with a homey, hand-made quilt. Here she enjoyed a variety of men throughout the semester. After many of the encounters she would hold seminars with naive young women like me who gathered on that bed and listened with envy. As the semester progressed, I often had one-on-one tutoring sessions with Dora who relished giving me back rubs as she recounted her conquests. The tingles Dora's hands produced while lingering at the base of my spine, then venturing slowly down my legs made me rejoice that I was her special pupil. One semester with Dora was worth my college tuition.

The next summer, I had my second sex discussion with Mom. I was hungover after a party, she was concerned. The conversation was brief "Lois, getting drunk can get you pregnant." As I pondered her theory and compared it with Dora's, I began to wonder if I had been adopted like my cousins.

As my stepson, Lucas, approaches adolescence sex has become a regular topic at the dinner table. Like many parents today, my partner Cathy and I try to be more open with our son about sex. It's inevitable really, given the topics in the headlines. Last summer when the GOP released the titillating Starr Report, we began to regret encouraging an interest in current affairs. Lucas now has a theoretical understanding of fellatio that Dora would have applauded. In addition to the Starr Report, we've also been confronted with a newspaper story about the death of an attorney in the region. The initial reports said that foul play was not an issue, however, the exact cause of death was mysteriously omitted for weeks. The puzzle was resolved when the coroner announced that the man had asphyxiated himself—during some kind of solo sex act. One evening as we ate pizza, Lucas asked the obvious question. "Mom, what's sexual asphyxiation?" Since we're '90s parents, we're not afraid of sex. We tried to be forthright. "Well, Lukie," I began, "some people like to tie themselves up. Or have someone else tie them up. I'm not exactly sure how that works, but somehow they cut off their oxygen supply and.... Well, what does happen then, Cath?" Cathy offered a vague description of plastic bags, leather and testicles, but Lucas was still confused. "You know, Luke," I made another effort, "all I know about this is what I saw on NYPD Blue last season. Maybe we can catch that show in reruns." "But I never get to watch NYPD Blue. You guys don't think I'm old enough." "Yeah, but you'll be 12 soon, we'll make an exception." Lucas shrugged dismissively, and I picked at a pepperoni, certain that we dealt with

this situation better than my mother would have. As lesbian parents, Cathy and I have another dimension of sex education that straight parents aren't usually confronted with. When Lucas was seven, he and Cathy were driving home from the country when Luke asked where he came from. Another time Cathy might have just said, "Buffalo, New York, Dear," but she suspected that his real question was about sex, so she described his conception by self-insemination, a technique many lesbians use to become mothers.

She told him that a good friend of hers had donated sperm, and she had inserted it into herself with a slender, glass pipette, like those used in laboratories. Lucas had always been told that he'd come from her belly, but now she was more explicit telling where babies grow and how he was birthed. Not believing he was ready for the details about masturbation, she hedged about how her friend provided the sperm and simply said that he just shook his penis around. Lucas seemed content with this explanation, and it wasn't until they were a few blocks from home that Cathy remembered a detail she'd forgotten. "Oh, Lucas. There's another way to make babies too," she began, explaining the old-fashioned, heterosexual method. Before she could finish, Lucas had his hands over his ears. "Nooo. I don't want to hear any more," he pleaded. I don't blame him. I think pipettes are easier to deal with than penises, too.

Last year we bought a book for Lucas entitled, *It's Perfectly Normal*. It's a gentle, honest discussion of many aspects of sexuality, sexual activity, and reproduction. Luke refuses to keep the book in his room. He's glanced through it, but doesn't want to talk about it. I think he'd rather hear the details from his friends. Last week, when he mentioned that a friend had brought a condom to school, Cathy asked if he had any questions or wanted to read the sex book again. "Oh, no!" he objected. "I'll just ask Miguel. He knows all about sex. He's an eighth-grader."

Even though we've tried to be more open about sex, I'm beginning to acknowledge what every kid of every generation knows—it's embarrassing to think that your parents know about it too. Lucas is horrified when buxom women slither sensuously in "Victoria's Secrets" TV commercials. He glances at us to see if we're watching too. I think he wants us to leave the room. Even though it has been more than 35 years since Mom and I dug around in that closet uncovering the Kotex box, and a geriatric John Glenn has even made a return trip to space, I find that I still get nervous watching mature-themed television shows with my mother. Bernie is 80 now and doesn't see or hear well so the TV was blasting as she sat on the couch this past summer with Cathy and me watching an episode of the TV sit-com, *Mad About You*. In the show, the exhausted new parents were trying to resurrect their sex life. It was very explicit. As we watched, I leaned as far away from Mom as I could, and I refused to look at her during dozens of risqué jokes. I could sense Cathy hyperventilating next to me, as nervous as I was. I desperately wanted to change channels. I would have too, except my mother sat there during the entire show chuckling or laughing out loud. I was appalled. When did she learn about sex?