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## INSTRUCTING CHILDREN IN THE ORIGIN OF LIFE

By ELISABETH ROBINSON SCOVIL

NURSES are often called upon for advice in this matter by mothers who are awakening to the fact that they owe a duty to their children in this respect and yet do not know how to fulfil it. If we could only divest our minds of the false modesty that has so long surrounded this subject and treat it from a common sense point of view the difficulties would vanish. The problem has been created because children have not been dealt with frankly, it will be solved when mothers and those who stand in the place of the mother learn that a child is entitled to absolute truth from parents or guardians.

Perhaps it will be more practically useful if the answers are repeated to some of the questions that have been asked me by those seeking information on this point.

How soon should a child be told the facts of birth? As soon as a child is old enough to ask, "Where did the baby come from?" he should be told the truth in language suited to his comprehension. There is no more reason why he should be deluded with fiction than there is when he asks, "Why does the sun go down every night and come up every morning?"

No age can be fixed, for much depends upon the child's intelligence. If he is full of curiosity and perpetually asking questions about the strange world in which he finds himself he will inevitably touch on this subject, and then reason and justice demand that he should be told the truth.

How should he be told? The simplest explanation that will satisfy is sufficient for a little child. An older one requires a more extended account of the phenomenon and should have it.

It should be given in a straightforward way, with no mystery, nor special secrecy. It is one of the wonderful things in nature, that is all. The child may be told that there are many things of which for various reasons we do not speak in mixed society and this is one of them. There is no reason, however, why it should not be talked about at proper times and any question he likes to ask will be gladly answered.

The wise mother prepares the way by showing an egg and telling the child how the little chicken grows inside the shell, bones and feathers, wings and beak and claws, all formed out of the soft contents.

She will describe how the hen lays the egg and broods over it for weeks until the warmth causes the marvellous development and at last the chicken is ready to come out of the shell and run about by itself.

When the child begins to question it is then easy to tell him that babies grow in the same way, only the eggs that they come from have no shell and are kept warm in the body of the mother until the baby is strong enough to live in the world. This is enough for a young child to be told. Whatever he learns later he will feel that his mother at least did not deceive him. It is a mistake to enter into the minute details until the child is old enough to desire them. Then they should be given as simply and straightforwardly as the first knowledge was imparted. If a mother keeps her child's confidence she will know when this time comes. He will not brood over the matter if there has never been any mystery about it, and he will be far less likely to discuss it with companions if he knows he can get accurate information from his parents as a matter of course.

#### TEACHING OLDER CHILDREN

As a child grows older, and the mind expands, the subject must be approached rather differently, if he has not been properly taught in early youth.

Owing to the poverty of the English language, which has no pronoun common to both sexes, I am compelled to use the masculine one for convenience, but this applies equally to girls, with whom, indeed, the mother or nurse should find much less difficulty in dealing. Something of this kind may be said, "You are old enough now to understand what I have not been able to tell you before. I want to explain to you how your body grew, little by little, until it was perfect and at last was born, a tiny helpless, baby thing." Then in simple words can be told how long months were required to perfect it and how when the time came it passed from the mother's immediate protecting care to breathe for itself, a separate life.

Even if a child has learned something of this from companions, who are rarely as tardy as parents in communicating these thrilling discoveries, he will be pleased and flattered at being taken into their confidence and treated as a reasonable being.

It is a thousand pities if the mother allows herself to be forestalled by anyone. She can only prevent this by beginning her instructions early, as soon as curiosity awakens, or even before this is aroused, if the child is thrown with other children.

**A FALSE IDEAL**

There may be exceptional cases in which a child who has been secluded from close association with others of about the same age has remained in complete ignorance of the manner in which human beings come into the world, until he has been enlightened in later years.

These exceptions seem to be the ideal towards which most mothers strive. Is it a legitimate one? Surely not. A clear understanding of this most important subject, intensely interesting to every child of man, relegating it to its proper place and divesting it of foolish mystery, seems a much more sane and reasonable one. What is there inherently indelicate in this marvel of creation, this wonder of birth, that makes us consider it an unfit topic of conversation with our children? It is our treatment of it that has vulgarized it, until we have come to regard it as a subject to be shunned for fear of contaminating them! We have no hesitation in talking to them of the twin mystery of death, when this body that was so wonderfully formed is dissolved again, yet some of the physical phenomena accompanying death are as unbeautiful as those which attend birth. We do not dwell on these when we speak of that great falling asleep.

**INSTRUCTING GIRLS**

When a girl is eleven or twelve years old she should be told something of the approaching menstruation,—what she is to look for and what preparations are necessary, the care that she must take of herself, if she wishes to be strong and healthy, and the danger of exposure and over-fatigue at this time.

Some girls fiercely resent this disability of sex and think it an intolerable hardship that ours is the only one that is burdened with it. These rebellious feelings are much better talked out and met with sympathy.

It is a burden, but it is the first step to motherhood, without it a woman is unsexed and robbed of her birthright. She may never wish to exercise the privilege, or circumstances may prevent her attaining it, but at least she has the power to become a mother and to hand on the torch of life to the next generation.

Most girls respond readily to high ideals and they cannot be taught too soon that "The courage to bear and the courage to dare are the same."

## INSTRUCTING BOYS

There is no difficulty in telling a boy everything that it is necessary for him to know without the slightest hint of indelicacy. Of course in early childhood sex scarcely enters into the question; he may be taught on the same lines as his sister. Boys who live in the country very soon become familiar with the actual process of birth, as they are constantly brought in contact with domestic animals. Even the boy who lives in town learns much from the advent of kittens and puppies.

It remains for the mother to talk with him frankly, yet delicately about himself. I know from personal experience that it is possible to do this. If the mother cannot bring herself to undertake the task it must be relegated to the father. Someone should do it. The boy should not be left to imperil his future and perhaps darken his whole after life through ignorance.

He should be told that there are parts of the body so delicate in structure that any manipulation may cause suffering and possibly loss of function. A warning is enough; it should not be dwelt upon, lest the very desire is aroused which it is wished to avoid.

As he grows older he should be told of the existence of the social diseases and fully warned of what may be the fatal consequence of even one illicit indulgence. Boys sin sometimes from curiosity, with no idea of the fearful risk they are running. They would not wilfully go into a house where there was a case of small-pox, yet they will expose themselves to the possibility of contracting syphilis, the great pox, because they do not know the danger.

Is it not criminal negligence not to warn them? We would not let a beloved child carry a package of nitroglycerine through a crowded street. He might get it to the journey's end in safety, but if he dropped it the result is too appalling to dwell on.

Every nurse knows the terrible consequences of these diseases. They bring not only suffering and often invalidism to the victim himself, but suffering and possibly death, in after years, to his wife and children. Knowledge is one means of stamping them out. If their horrors have been impressed upon a boy he knows that pleasant vices may be scorpions in disguise and when he contemplates indulging in them he may be deterred by fear and self-interest. These are powerful incentives to right-doing and may be a stronger deterrent than the higher motives which sometimes yield under pressure of temptation.