

HEALTHY SEXUALITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS: THE ROLE
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS

Kent Chrisman, Ed.D.

jkchri@wharf.ship.edu

&

Donna Couchenour, Ph.D.

dlcouc@ark.ship.edu

Department of Teacher Education
Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania
1871 Old Main Drive
Shippensburg, PA 17257

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Healthy sexuality development begins at birth. In
order to develop optimally, infants and young children need

sensitive, responsive nurturing from their caregivers. Much of this same important adult-child interaction that supports healthy physical, cognitive, social and emotional development also supports healthy sexuality development. One of the best ways to understand sexuality development in young children is to relate it to all of the developmental processes (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2000).

Just as teachers of young children (birth through eight years) play a very important role in physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, they also have an impact on children's sexuality development. Surveys of early childhood teachers, however, have indicated that many of them have been ill prepared to deal with children's curiosity and behaviors related to sexuality (Couchenour, Gottshall, Chrisman, & Koons, 1997). Teachers have indicated surprise, not realizing that very young children are curious about their bodies as well as those of others. Teachers have also expressed confusion about the difference between behaviors indicative of sexual abuse and those that are typical developmental indicators.

The authors of this proposal have recently completed a book entitled *Healthy Sexuality Development in Young Children: A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers and Families*. This book is in press with the National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and will be published fall 2002. Reviewers of the first draft of the book noted the importance of information related to healthy sexuality for early childhood educators, both in their work with children and with families. The premises that are upheld throughout this work are:

1. Healthy sexuality development begins at birth.
2. Children learn about sexuality the same way they learn about everything else--through words, actions, interactions and relationships.
3. Families are children's primary teachers about sexuality development.
4. Early childhood professionals support children's healthy sexuality development both directly, as they interact with children, and indirectly, as they work with families and plan programs.

The Hawaii International Conference on Education will provide a unique forum for sharing developmental information about healthy sexuality. Additionally, these authors will share suggested professional development strategies for teachers regarding this topic. Four requirements for professional development (Wilson, 1991) note that teachers should:

1. Explore their own values with respect to sexuality.

2. Gain relevant knowledge about children's healthy sexuality development.
3. Learn appropriate methods of answering children's sexual questions.
4. Practice appropriate methods of answering children's sexual questions.

Based on these requirements, the authors will provide detailed examples for six training sessions highlighting: the relationship of physical, cognitive and social-emotional development to sexuality development; details of the continuum of sexuality development that begins at birth; healthy sexuality development can provide a barrier against sexual abuse or harassment; the importance of teacher intervention when children engage in aggressive acts with sexual content; the use of anatomically correct language without hesitation or embarrassment; and, ways to support families as children's first teachers regarding sexuality development.