

## SEX TEACHING IN SCHOOLS.

It can be said without exaggeration that the issue of the Report of the Commission on Venereal Diseases revolutionized the state of public opinion in this country. Three points may be selected to emphasize and explain this change :—

1. It was shown that 10 per cent. of the persons examined were afflicted with syphilis, while an even greater proportion had some form of the diseases.

2. Recent experience of the wonderful results obtainable by salvarsan or similar preparations led to the belief that the diseases could be cured, provided that expert treatment was sought without delay.

3. The blamelessness of so many sufferers lifted the whole question largely out of the atmosphere that had previously enveloped it, and permitted of its discussion on a new and quite different plane.

The report received immediate official attention. The issues it raised were openly and publicly discussed; large meetings were held all over the country, and were not only attended by, but addressed by, both men and women.

The result is, that the vital importance of dealing openly with sex questions is to-day an accepted fact in many centres, especially in the large towns. But, particularly in the country districts, many are still steeped in the miasma of early-Victorian prejudice. Must this continue? Are we to wait for a slow and gradual enlightenment, or is it possible to accelerate it?

One way towards this would be to give sex tuition in schools. The argument so constantly met with still: "We were not taught about such matters when we were young,—our children must not be taught them now," may be dismissed briefly. Such reasoning would relegate civilization to cave dwellings, skin-clothing and coracles. Innumerable leaflets and books on the subject are readily available for adults and children of all ages and both sexes. The writer recently studied over forty pamphlets, all admirable in their way. As an example, "The Cradle Ship" may be instanced, written for those of the tenderest age. With its fairy story of the mother-love to be found amongst all living creatures, it affords an admirable basis for more advanced knowledge.

It is interesting to note that at present, of those who are most eager to extend the tuition of sex knowledge the majority are still against class teaching. It is equally interesting to note how divergent are their reasons for this. Much of the literature on sex

matters, however, was written before the issue of the Report, which may have changed views previously held.

It is argued that unless the teaching be of a high order, more harm than good may result. This applies with equal force to the teaching of many other important subjects. When weighing any particular course of action, it is well to consider the alternative. In this case it would mean that on account of the risk of a certain amount of inferior teaching, the whole subject is to be taboo. Nor is it really so difficult to handle, for a study of some of the publications referred to, will show with what grace and delicacy the subject-matter can be clothed.

It is difficult for us to realise at first that doubts on this point have been indissolubly bound up with the unconscious—though perfectly natural—bias of adult minds. As adults, we involuntarily associate sex questions with extraneous ideas—based on adult knowledge that sullies their inherent purity. It is difficult for the adult mind to project itself on to the plane of the child mind. And herein lies the crux of our imagined difficulties. “Children demand facts not explanations.” They may be taught the origin of their birth, on simple, natural lines, in a manner which will explain, but not accentuate, the physical facts, while bringing out as the salient point that wonderful phenomenon in nature—mother-love. Moreover, nature study and hygiene as actually taught in schools, can be made readily to lead on quite gently and naturally to sex instruction.

Though strongly opposed by many, it is surely desirable that in mixed schools the subject should invariably be taught to boys and girls together. To separate them for the purpose would instantly vitiate the atmosphere of perfect naturalness which is a prime essential. Then, too, the teacher’s words would not be changed in tone or substance as would undoubtedly be the case if passed on from boy to girl or *vice versa* as soon as they met after the class.

The statement that “the doctor brought the baby,” or “the baby was found under a gooseberry bush,” are not only untruths, but palpable untruths. They instantly invest the subject with all the fascination of a mystery, to be pondered over in secret—precisely the attitude of mind to be avoided. Moreover, future information on such matters will be mistrusted by the child.

Immorality is largely due to mental stimulation. Strike at it from the first by explaining the origin of life in the right way, and much of a child’s inquisitiveness to probe further into the subject will disappear. It will be accepted as other facts are accepted, and left at that.

Prominence must of course be given to the right things: the beauty of mother-love; the spiritual side of reproduction; the responsibility of parenthood; the necessity for such matters to be

approached with the same devoutness as religion; the avoidance of all light talk about them; their discussion only with parents, teachers or doctors, etc., etc.

If such ideas be inculcated in early childhood, they will make an indelible impression for life.

Few doubt that immorality will continue so long as human beings continue to populate this earth. But tuition of this kind can do much to lessen it. The life-stories of certain girls and women, investigated for the purpose of ascertaining the cause of the first lapse, show that it was due in many cases to a mere whim, or a passing desire for excitement. Is it too much to believe that had early instruction been allowed to fortify the inherent feminine instinct for purity, it would quite possibly have just prevented their going astray?

The need for such early tuition is in one way more imperative for boys than for girls, for the testimony of both medical men and male teachers shows that much self-inflicted harm is done by boys through sheer ignorance. Moreover, certain watchful public school teachers have found that bad habits, which it is distressing to learn are far more widespread than is generally imagined, are as a rule discontinued after a serious talk between master and pupil. Such talks were of course private, and it is not for a moment suggested that personal discussions of this nature are not infinitely more desirable than class teaching, wherever and whenever such a course is possible. To older boys much might also be said in class about a boy's honour; the call upon him to protect the weaker sex; the fact that incontinence, formerly supposed to be a necessity for the attainment of a ripe manhood, is now condemned by medical men as an evil.

It is no exaggeration to aver that at present many men would see no wrong in "taking advantage" of a woman were she herself willing to permit him to do so. This attitude, accepted by the average man as a matter of course, is not generally known to women. Is it not desirable that her eyes should be opened to this before leaving school, so that—apart from other reasons—she may realise her responsibility and the risks run? Moreover, should not the error of such a belief be instilled into our boys at as early an age as possible? Such a course would take two-fold effect in not only reducing immorality on the part of the man, but, through the appeal to his honour, might lead to enlisting his active sympathy to protect an erring woman from herself.

It has been reiterated, *ad nauseam*, that sex teaching amongst children increases the very evils it seeks to lessen. Is this borne out by fact?

Sooner or later all children become acquainted with sex knowledge, and most of them with facts of child-birth, often unfortu-

nately, in an undesirable way. With minds already attuned to the highest ideals, fresh information would do little harm.

An interesting sidelight on this is thrown on the subject by the head teacher of a large London slum-school, who states that immorality is unknown amongst her children. She believes that this may be due to many of the children sleeping in the same room as their parents, and accepting as facts of ordinary life matters which would normally remain entirely hidden from them. Among London children of a better class immoral tendencies appear often to be more marked.

Undoubtedly one of the great difficulties to be faced is the opposition to modern ideas on the part of the parents. This is sometimes very strong, even in villages, where the children see reproduction in the animal world, taking place all round them.

It is illuminating to remember the public horror when ladies first appeared on bicycles, or in quite recent times donned knickerbockers. It took some years for the nation to accustom itself to the idea of mixed bathing, which was at its inception condemned as a public abomination, or the forerunner of a whole series of indecencies to be introduced from abroad. There is a peculiarly close resemblance between this past view of mixed bathing and that on sex instruction adopted by many individuals at present.

A well-known authority has remarked that one of the greatest opponents of enlightened mothercraft, is the grandmother. Similarly in sex matters, it is often the parent who is to-day the stumbling-block. It is desirable therefore that parents too should be invited to reconsider their views, and this is perhaps most easily done by addresses at meetings. It will be found that as a whole, the father is far readier to welcome sex tuition than the mother.

In this connection, the parents' attention may be drawn to the experience of rescue workers. They all tell the same story—how frequently the bitter heart-cry reaches them from those to whom they devote so much loving-kindness: "Why did no one tell me?" Mr. John Oxenham, in the *Teachers' World*, speaks out with brutal frankness on the same point, as it affects young men in the army. Listen to what he has to say:—

"And—here is the pathos of it—letter after letter manfully acknowledges the fall, and begs help and prayers for better things, and in very many cases asks, as the writers of them have the right to ask, 'Why, in God's name, were we never told of these things till it was too late? It began with me as a boy, taught me by another. I did not understand the evil of it, and no one ever took the trouble to explain. Oh, if I had only known, or someone had only told me.' For lack of that simple instruction in matters of sex so vitally concerning their future welfare, tens—aye, without any exaggeration, hundreds—of

thousands of our boys and girls—have fallen into this slimy pit, which was all avoidable if the truly damnable nineteenth and twentieth century prudishness of parents and teachers had not stood in the way."

Most writers believe that it is the parents alone who should teach their children this subject. Undoubtedly this is the ideal. But the number of parents capable of undertaking it, are few, and of these, many, it is feared, shirk the task. The less educated classes, for many reasons, such as a limited vocabulary, lack of knowledge of how to handle the subject, etc., must find especial difficulty in speaking to their children. Religious teaching is not left entirely to the parents, nor would most parents be expected to teach their children, say, physiology or medicine. Tuition in the schools would not leave everything to chance as at present, and the state of affairs so forcibly voiced above, would at any rate be ameliorated. "To the pure, all things are pure," and with training and practice teachers can speak of sex, in words which leave no room for misconstruction, but which enlighten and instruct in the right way. At least one country education centre in the South of England is moving with the times. The teachers who have just qualified and are taking up instruction, have been informed that any sex questions put to them in class by children are to be answered correctly and truthfully. This involves a far larger step forward than would at first appear to be the case, and marks a radical change of front. Possibly other authorities will follow this lead, so that the epoch-making change to which attention has been drawn already may find its natural corollary in educational circles.

Education in this country is admittedly in the melting-pot. It is to be hoped that from the crucible may flow the molten metal of truth, freed from all the false sentiment that has for so long obscured its perfect purity.

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