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The Birds and The Bees: Teaching Parents How to Educate their Children about Sex

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Birds and The Bees: Teaching Parents How to Educate Their Children about Sex

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Abstract. Parent educators at Michigan State University Extension have had great success with their Extension Extras Parenting Hour series which began in 2020. The series is organized every quarter, meets weekly, and changes topics every week. The 90 minute class covers a range of parenting topics from positive discipline, talking to children about race, early literacy, and now, due to a need being identified and addressed, how to educate children about sex and sexuality. This new topic to the series has received positive feedback from participants and has led to community organizations asking for similar classes and support from the team.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of parent education are numerous for parents, children, and the wider community they live in. Research shows that when parents are more knowledgeable about child development and effective parenting skills, they are more confident and capable as parents, which in turn impacts the overall community they live in (Hickey et. al, 2018). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services listed having “knowledge of parenting and child development” as one of the six protective factors that could help mitigate or eliminate risk in families and communities (Innis, 2014). Parent-education programs are in a unique position to address current and relevant issues in society. Research shows how early intervention and prevention programs for parents are found to be cost-effective and have a direct impact on society and the economy (Moyses, 2017; Hickey et. al, 2108). One topic that could be discussed more in parenting programs is sex education. Despite the reality that schools are providing less sex education than before, the number of youth talking with their parents about sex has not increased in recent years (Sneen, 2019). Discussing sex, sexual health, and sexuality with their children can create feelings of anxiety and apprehension in parents (Ashcraft et. al, 2017), and, “parents tend to exclude positive topics associated with sexuality, such as pleasure, love, and healthy relationships, in favor of negative topics and warnings” (Ashcraft, 2017, p. 305). Some parents might even need help learning the medical and scientific facts related to sex, as they, “. . . often have incomplete or inaccurate information on issues such as medical effectiveness and safety of condoms and other contraceptives” (Shtarkshall et. al., 2007, p. 117). Sneen (2019) writes that by increasing parental involvement in a child’s sex education and by using comprehensive sex education curricula in school we can begin to “promote future generations to respect all genders, communicate their needs and boundaries, and feel safe in coming forward with allegations of sexual abuse or assault” (p. 468).

When one reviews the literature of the impacts of comprehensive sex education (specifically in Scandinavian countries) versus abstinence only sex education (specifically in the United States) one is able to see the community and public health benefits of providing more comprehensive sex education. Sweden has had a national comprehensive sex education policy since the 1970s, and the overall sexual health of their population shows the benefits of such policies. They have lower STI and HIV rates, as well as fewer teen pregnancies, compared to Michigan statistics (State of Michigan) (Public Health Agency of Sweden). Michigan, like many states in the United States, does not have a comprehensive sex education policy; the only state education requirement is HIV and AIDS prevention education. It is up to local school districts to determine the topics taught in sex education classrooms, which have

led to wide disparities in knowledge across the state (SIECUS). Extension programs are known for addressing gaps and disparities in communities. They provide parent education on various topics, and by including classes on sex and sexuality to their list of classes, they would be fulfilling a need for both families and communities.

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

In the summer and fall of 2022, Michigan State University Extension staff in their Child and Family Development team, including a graduate intern from Grand Valley State University, saw a gap in their program offerings for parents. They created the Birds and the Bees: Talking with Kids About Sex class to add to their Extension Extras Parenting class series. The class series includes a variety of sessions on various parenting topics such as positive discipline, talking to children about race, and early literacy. Some of the most popular sessions are repeated on a quarterly basis with the other classes being offered once or twice throughout the year. MSU Extension developed the series during the COVID-19 pandemic because the virtual offerings let parents attend the classes in the evening from the comfort of their homes. The series continues to be highly attended.

The Birds and The Bees: Talking with Kids About Sex program is a ninety-minute presentation meant for parents, guardians, and childcare providers. The planning team felt that adding a session on how to talk with children about sex and sexuality met two sets of needs for parents: First, the program introduces the various topics that parents would want to learn about regarding sex and sexuality. Second, the program gives specific guidance on how to have discussions about sex and sexuality with children and youth. The first part of the class teaches participants about comprehensive sex education and why it's important for adults raising children to educate their children about sex and sexuality. The rest of the class goes through the ages and stages of children and milestones related to sexual development. Based on research and their own experience working with parents, the team decided to organize the class by developmental stages. Many of the topics and issues parents face regarding sexual development, like other child-development stages, build on one another as children age. By organizing the information in a linear fashion, parents can see how they can build on their children's knowledge and also their own confidence in discussing topics involving sex and sexuality as their child ages. For example, for children four-to-five-years-old, the key topics and milestones that parents and caregivers should be knowledgeable about are:

- continuing to explain that genitals are private as a child's curiosity grows,
- continuing to explain and establish consent,
- finding teachable moments to talk about sex, pregnancy, gender, and so forth. (Advocates for Youth)

Some of the other topics covered in the program include: healthy relationships, the importance of naming body parts, contraception, and pregnancy. The class was designed to be taught over a Zoom webinar. Videos from the website AMAZE were used during the presentation and were consistently praised in the classes as helpful. The class used polls and discussion questions to keep the audience engaged—some of the questions that were asked during the class included:

- Did your parents or guardians have conversations with you about sex or sexuality?
- What topics do you feel comfortable talking about with your children?
- What would you say was your primary source of sex education?
- How have you handled a situation with your child when they have asked a question that you were not prepared to answer?

EVALUATION RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

MSU Extension staff and their graduate intern offered the program in December 2022 and February 2023. The survey tool used for the program was a reflective pre- and post-evaluation tool, and the survey results provided much needed insight from parents. The first two questions addressed participants' pre- and post-class knowledge about sex education and sexuality. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, there was a shift and growth in the participant's learning and increased confidence in their ability to talk with children on the topics discussed in the class. What

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Q6: Before the Workshop

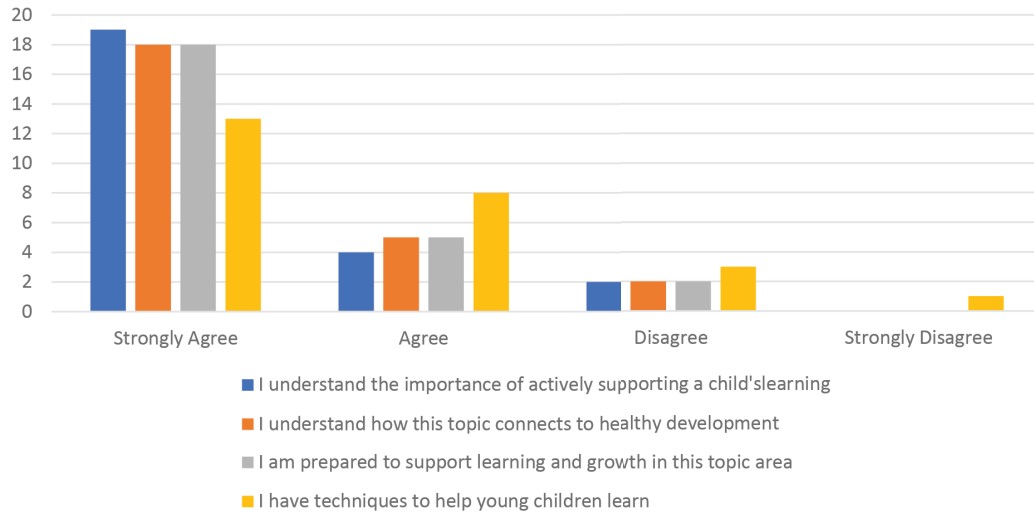


Figure 1. Bar graph showing participant knowledge pre-workshop.

Q7: After the Workshop

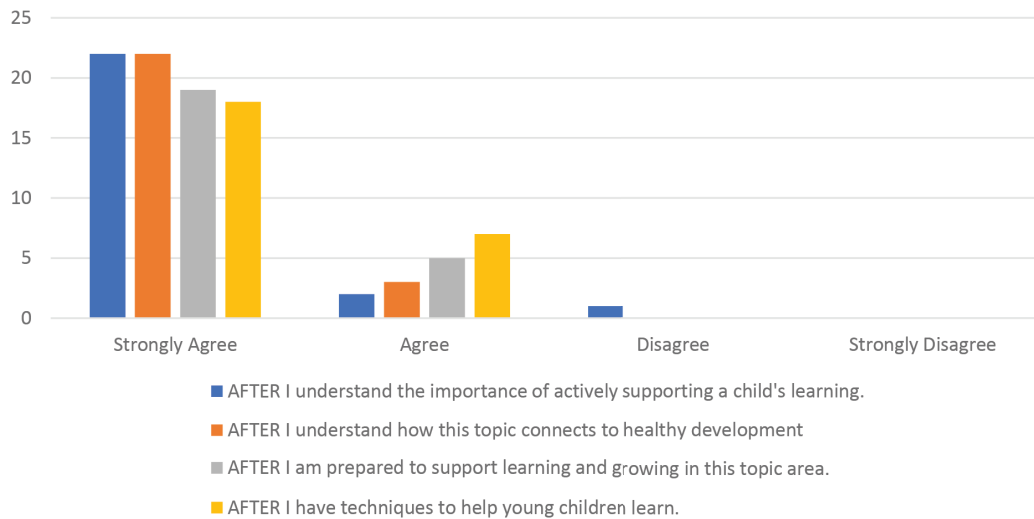


Figure 2. Bar graph showing participant knowledge post-workshop

is interesting to note in the responses is that even parents who felt competent before attending the program still gained knowledge on these topics.

Questions nine, ten, and eleven dealt with the overall satisfaction of the class by asking the participants to respond with a *Yes*, *Somewhat*, or *No* to the following statements:

- I am satisfied with the knowledge that I gained in this workshop.
- I am satisfied with the instructor's teaching ability.
- The class materials and activities were interesting, useful, and engaging.

Most of the participants (88%) responded *Yes* to all three statements, indicating a strong approval to the overall approach of the class. There were a few open-ended questions included in the survey to gauge how the participants could use the information they learned right away with children. The participants reiterated the following takeaways:

- the importance of having honest and developmentally appropriate conversations with children,
- that they learned the milestones of sexual development and how to discuss those milestones with their children,
- how to be an askable parent who has an open-door policy with their children.

The final qualitative question asked the participants for suggestions for improvement. The majority of the feedback was positive, with parents asking for more in-depth sessions and more frequency in class offerings. There was some constructive feedback provided by a couple of participants who noted that they did not feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and sharing their experiences. This feedback is important to keep in mind for all parenting classes, but especially in classes dealing with such controversial and personal topics as sex education.

The final questions we asked were demographic questions. Between the two offerings there were a total of 70 participants. 64% identified as Female, 17 % identified as Male, >1% identifying as Non-Binary with the remaining choosing Prefer Not to Respond. 58% identified as White, 7% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 7% identified as Black/African American, 4% identified as Asian with the rest choosing Prefer Not to Respond. Most (88%) of the participants were parents, with the remaining participants being child-care providers. Most of the participants had children between zero and eight-years-old. One participant commented that they did not have any children yet, which is of note to think about how parenting classes can be inclusive to hopeful and expectant parents. Finally, upon hearing about this class topic, the Child and Family Development Team has received requests from local community partners to provide this program, as well as other topics on parenting and gender, in person.

REPLICATION

Reflecting on our research to create The Birds & The Bees program and examining the feedback we received from our program participants, we suggest that any new curriculum or program should teach parents hands-on, practical skills and knowledge that they can use in their everyday interactions with their children. It is also important that the classes are comprehensive, non-judgmental, and developmentally appropriate. Extension programs should consider the method of instruction for these programs. We chose to host the class virtually because we utilized an existing program that had name recognition and had proven to be a success already. We also recognized that attending such a class in-person might be difficult for some parents for a variety of reasons. While we did not utilize this option, self-paced modules housed on an organizational website would be a great alternative. Other resources such as articles, social media campaigns, and radio/television public service announcements might be other avenues that Extension staff could begin to replicate this work. It is also vital that the staff who teach the program are knowledgeable in topics related to sex education and feel confident teaching the subject matter. If programs do not have staff who fit that criterion, this is a great opportunity to partner with other organizations in the community and even other departments in their land grant institution.

CONCLUSION

The work of Extension programs, both at MSU Extension and other land-grant institutes, “helps people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge resources of MSU directly to individuals, communities and businesses” (MSU Extension,2024). By providing parenting classes that address the many topics, issues, and milestones that make up a child’s development, including topics related to sex and sexuality, Extension services are improving the lives of families and the communities they live in. By increasing awareness of these topics and providing a safe space to ask questions and discuss how to handle sensitive issues, families and communities become stronger and more resilient. Parent Education that focuses on talking with children about sex and sexuality is not only beneficial for adults and children but is also well received in practice by parents and caregivers. MSU Extension’s innovative program—The Birds and the Bees: Talking with Kids About Sex—provides a space for parents to learn and ask questions about this important topic, ultimately impacting the children in their care.

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