

Sex for Beginners

Ellen Handler Spitz

It's Perfectly Normal

by Robie H. Harris

Candlewick Press, 96 pp., \$12.99

Among the many purposes served by children's books, that of teaching kids about subjects that their parents cannot or will not broach ranks high. In our increasingly libidinous and violent culture, and amid our advancing contraceptive technologies, breakdowns in societal structures, and the waning influence of religious warnings and prohibitions, some form of sex education would seem downright urgent. For even in the highly eroticized global culture of today, alarming numbers of young people do not know the basic biology of sex and human reproduction. (When teen pregnancy occurs, this is what we hear: but we only did it once; but we were standing up; but he pulled out.)

Openly or secretly, every toddler wonders at some point: Where did I come from? Moreover, pre-adolescents trouble over the rate and the dimensions of their changing body contours. A recent *New York Times* article reports that some American girls are now starting puberty as early as seven and eight years of age—highly disturbing data. A child in a woman's body can handle neither the concomitant hormonal upheavals nor the ensuing advances from men and boys.

Robie Harris's fine book on sexuality has been updated and reworked for the fifteenth anniversary of its publication. It actually lives up to its promise and delivers "honest, reliable, accurate, and accessible information" about human sexuality and reproduction. Harris's scientific bent prompts her to provide thoroughgoing up-to-date research on every topic from reproduction and contraception to HIV/AIDS and abortion law. But this book is far from a heavy-handed textbook.

Harris has chosen her title with care. Her principal purpose—beyond that of importing crucial information, which is clearly paramount—is to render her subject non-threatening. Most books on sexuality for children offer anatomical diagrams and pictures of the sexes at different stages of development. This one, by populating its pages with humorous and friendly-faced folks, bears brave witness to acts rarely depicted in the others. Drawn disarmingly in a light-hearted vein, the images here include a boy having an erection, a boy putting on a condom, a young girl masturbating and a boy doing likewise, a girl upside down studying her genital area with a mirror, and an interracial couple in bed, smilingly making love. Young readers viewing these pages, even if they skim the text, may find visual answers to their unformed questions. Another normalizing technique introduces a duo of pint-sized characters—a cartoon bird and bee—both wearing shirts and sneakers, who cavort through the book and comment in comic-strip bubbles, section by section. These embedded creature-critics cleverly represent the attitudes of both an embarrassed, defended, disgusted child who doesn't want to know (Bee: "Are we finished with all this body stuff for now?") and a curious child who does want to know (Bird: "No! Definitely not!").

The last page of *It's Perfectly Normal* reiterates its principal message. Bird and bee discuss whether thinking and talking about bodies and sexuality is "normal or gross." Missing here is what this otherwise excellent book lacks, namely, a serious engagement with why the subject itself continues to prove so embarrassing, stressful, anxiety-

ridden, confusing, and shrouded in mystery and innuendo. By gleefully agreeing that it is all “perfectly normal,” the bird and the bee elide this darker side of sexuality. Perhaps this is because adults—including most writers, reviewers, and even endorsers of children’s books—are themselves prey to some measure of ineradicable apprehension when faced with this intricately entwined realm of fantasy and behavior. Still, Harris is too casual here. To imply that sexuality should be all sunny and soothing is misleading, and pedagogically inadequate. There remains the hard task of trying to think through, in the company of young people, rather than as their wise guides, some of sexuality’s daunting contradictions.

This challenge has been nicely met, by contrast, in Lynda Madaras’s two books, *What’s Happening to My Body?*, for boys and girls. Inevitably covering the factual material found in Harris and Emberley but with black-and-white line drawings devoid of any special character, Madaras addresses her reader directly in the second person and starts off with an immediate focus on context. She begins her girls’ book with an anecdote about the nastiness of pre-pubescent girls who gossip maliciously behind each others’ backs, and ostracize their chosen victims, and betray one another by switching loyalties. Instantly we are in the thick of the difficult terrain, plunged appropriately into a psycho-social milieu, and it is from here that the biological story of sexuality unfolds. Even when one breaks down the subject for children, one needs to confront the puzzles.

A few serious and jarring notes might have deepened Harris’s presentation and enhanced its value for adolescents. In regard to menstruation, for instance, there is hardly a mention of the ongoing—and devastating—history of taboo, and none at all of the subtle ways in which this event alters forever the dynamics within the family and changes a girl’s relationships with both her mother and her father. The feelings that go along with such a life-changing event deserve acknowledgment in a book on sexuality. Likewise on the subject of giving birth: uterine contractions and vaginal dilation rarely occur in the absence of pain, but this unpleasant fact is left unstated. To become a mother is to bear a child, and labor is never an unmitigated joy. And what about the morning after sex, which may not prove as pleasurable as the moment during which it occurs? And the resultant changes to one’s sense of self, which can be dramatic and intense? To have explored these psychological facets of sexuality might erode the upbeat mood, but it would have made this otherwise valuable book even more valuable. Since parents often find it hard to broach these topics, a book like this can be offered to a young teenager—placed in his or her room—in hopes that, after being read privately, it might serve as the springboard for live intergenerational conversation.

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