It's in the Brain

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What the parents of teenage children should know about sexuality

It is popular today to assert that the best parents can do is watch with admiration, but remotely the sexual experimenting of their adolescent children. Nowadays, the influence of the peer group is usually overemphasized while on the same token that of the parent is downplayed. Yet, if we paid attention to what adolescents themselves say - as a recent American study shows - we could know that their parents still have the greatest influence on their behavior and value system.

Researchers stress that a teenager should not be left alone in any way because they need support, guidance, and education, especially on such an important question like sex. Surveys have shown that the vast majority of adolescents, whom their parents talk about sexuality, rely on information obtained from their parents and not those of their peers. It is also a statistical fact that children whose parents disapprove of extramarital sex and the use of contraceptives, and even dare to say so, are less likely to be sexually active at an early age.

Early sexuality, attachment difficulties

The wisdom of parents is also supported by science. Recent brain research, for example, has shown a link between early sexual life and the inability to commit. In their book, *Hooked, New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children* (McKissic and McIlhaney, 2008). Joe S. McIlhnaey, Jr. and Freda McKissic Bush both obstetricians and gynecologists, have reported that the younger a person starts having sex without a desire for commitment, the more his or her ability to commit later decreases. This will be the "norm" for him, which is very difficult to change. The statistical results also support this. According to a survey by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Mosher et al., 2002), nearly 60% of girls who have their first sexual experience before the age of 16 will have six or more sexual partners in their lifetime, while those who have had their first sexual experience after the age of 20, this proportion is only 15.2%, and 52.2% will have only one sexual partner in their lifetime. Sexual fidelity is one of the secrets to a long and happy relationship, as today the two most important causes for divorce are infidelity and alcoholism. So, anyone who wants to live a life in a monogamous marriage based on fidelity should start his or her sexual activity as late as possible.

Are 16-year-olds able to make rational decisions? Well, not too many. The brain researchers just quoted can explain why. Recent imaging procedures such as CT, MRI or PET have highlighted many novelties about the human brain. One of the greatest discoveries due to MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) technology, for example, is that the region of the brain, that is responsible for making mature and rational decisions that take into account the consequences of actions reach full maturity and physical development in an individual sometime only in the mid 20s (Johnson, 2022). Therefore, it is physically impossible for an adolescent to make a fully mature and rational decision.

The most malleable organ

And when asked why those who are waiting to start their sex life are more likely to have a long lasting and loyal marriage, professionals also bring up results related to brain research. By the end of the adolescent years, the brain has about 10 billion neurons (nerve cells). These are isolated from each other, the connection between them is realized through the so-called synapses. However, the connections between individual nerve cells are not eternal, they persist as long as a stimulus passes through them, that is, as long as they are used. What is not used is bound to disappear. The brain is not a static organ, it is constantly evolving, changing based on the experience gained, but the brain of a young person is much more flexible, more malleable, new connections and synapses between nerve cells are easier to form. According to the model that explains how our brains work (Spear, 2013), every experience that comes to us is stored, creating new connections between neurons, and if this experience is repeated several times, that connection is strengthened so much that after a while it becomes the basic response to a given situation. I'm nervous? I light up a cigarette. With every cigarette I light, the smoker grows stronger in me, and with every cigarette I give up, the non-smoker grows stronger in me — for non-smoking has the same neural pathways as smoking. According to traditional Chinese medicine, if someone falls ill because of a certain harmful lifestyle, he/she should spend an equal amount of time to eliminate the illness. Let's say you smoked for 10 years, now you have another 10 years to reverse that process. It is for the same reason that there is no totally cured alcoholic, only one who does not drink.

And sexuality can be the same drug as alcohol or cigarettes. Sexual intercourse releases neurochemicals (dopamine, oxytocin, vasopressin) in the brain that create a pleasurable feeling that has hitherto been necessary and sufficient for people to have sex and, incidentally, to reproduce. A completely different situation has arisen today, where, due to different contraceptive techniques and legal abortion, sexual pleasure and reproduction have become separate things, the latter has become a conscious decision: the child is not the fruit of making love but of a conscious decision. Thus far, it was evolution that made sure we didn't die out, now we are left on our own. And, as experience shows, with increasing material well-being, fertility decreases - we want children, but there is a growing number of things that we want even more.

Just sex and nothing else

Another great discovery made using imaging research methods is that the areas of the brain that control love and sexual desire are located separately in the brain (Cacioppo, 2012). Here is the answer to the old question whether there can be love (friendship) between two people free of sexuality. Well, it can very well exist, a person doesn't have to have every relationship imbued with sexuality.

However, it also means that there can be sex without any emotion. Thus, one who constantly and consciously excludes emotions from his or her sexuality will have, after a while, his or her brain adapting to this norm creating structural changes in it — for the brain is a value-neutral organ. And for someone to whom emotionless sex has once become the norm, it can be difficult to smuggle emotions, tenderness, and intimacy back even when they want to have them.

Sex is most enjoyable in a permanently monogamous relationship

The complex system of our brain is structured in such a way that sexuality is pleasurable (dopamine) so that we feel like doing it again and again. It also makes sure that a bond is formed between the parties involved (oxytocin, vasopressin) to hold them together, love each other and care for the children who are born. (It is a telling fact that when a woman first has an emotionless, casual sexual relationship, a "hook-up" with a man, only 11% of them manage to reach an orgasm. On the second and third such occasions, it is 16%, and from the fourth casual intercourse it rises to 34%. – as research done by New York University professor of sociology, Paula England shows (England, 2011). Women in stable relationships however are much more likely to reach an orgasm with a success rate of 68%.)

The whole system is designed so that one can achieve the most pleasure, the deepest intimacy, and the greatest pleasure (!) in lasting and monogamous relationships. Joe S. McIlhnaey, Jr., and Freda McKissic Bush both obstetrician-gynecologists, in their co-authored book: *Hooked, New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children* emphasize that our decision-making ability from the highest regions of the human brain could lead everyone to the most enjoyable sexual behaviour — unless some "programming error" interferes from a too early or otherwise botched sexual experience (McKissic and McIlhaney, 2008). This is because such an experience adversely affects an individual's ability to make healthy decisions. This is a danger that neither today's youth nor a significant portion of their parents are aware of. A young person who is completely immersed in a relationship that ends in a breakup then gets involved in a subsequent one that also ends in a breakup and so on does enormous damage to his or her brain's natural mechanism for building trust and attachment. So the common "wisdom" that 'it's worth trying everything and it's good to experience ourselves thoroughly before we calm down' is utterly false.

But what can those people do to whom this recognition arrives too late? They don't have to despair that it is all over, because there is hope for them too, although it will not be easy. It has been said many times even in this article how malleable the brain is, it changes throughout our lives, so bad innervations can not only be created but also be eliminated. Of course, to do this, we must first accept that these are bad innervations and that our natural decision-making ability is impaired. If one consciously does what is right, after a while it also becomes "part of one's personality". And if you even ask God for help in healing, you have every chance of success.

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