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BOOK REVIEWS

Speakeasy: Talking With Your Children About Growing Up. Family Planning Association (with a foreword by Dr Miriam Stoppard). London, UK: fpa, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-1-905506-63-7. Price: £9.99. Pages: 132 (paperback)

Question 1: Where did young people get most sex and relationships education (SRE) in the 20th century? Answer: According to a British School Inspectorate (OFSTED) survey, from parents. Question 2: Where do young people get most SRE in the 21st century? Answer: According to OFSTED, from teachers.

So why the shift? All too often because parents and carers feel embarrassed, de-resourced, powerless in a society so sexualised that it sometimes feels as if children know more about sex than adults do. Which is where the fpa's 'Speakeasy' courses come in, helping such adults to give young people accurate and supportive sex education in the family setting.

But why am I wittering on about face-to-face courses in the middle of a book review? The answer is that the fpa has now turned the course material into book form, based on the experience of Speakeasy trainers and participants.

And it works. The book is outstandingly practical, clearly based on the real problems of real parents, and on real solutions that have worked. It begins by addressing why home SRE is vital, how to overcome embarrassment, how to start talking. There follows coverage of puberty, love, sexuality, safer sex, pornography, contraception, STIs, pregnancy choices and pregnancy safety.

This is all presented through simple text with numerous suggestions of 'how to'; what questions you can ask young people, what questions they may ask and how to answer, and sample problem scenarios. Throughout, the material takes into

account different religious and cultural issues; different age groups of children; and what to do if you are a step-parent, grandparent or foster parent. The whole book is written simply, directly, personally and without a hint of judgement or patronising tone.

Any criticisms? Only trivial ones. The big format and large print slightly hint at 'textbook'. The reams of useful organisations are – as might be expected – UK-based.

But I'm quibbling. My end judgement is that this book should be recommended by any Journal reader to every parent or carer – and read by every Journal reader who has children. I further hold that if, next time OFSTED assess where sex education is being delivered, they discover that home SRE has risen in the league tables, then this book will be hugely responsible for that shift having occurred.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sexual Health and Fitness. Kate Bracey, Kathryn Arendt, David Winchester. London, UK: Alpha Books (Penguin Group), 2008. ISBN-13: 978-1-592-57766-8. Price: £11.40. Pages: 320 (paperback)

I like the *Complete Idiot's Guides* that I've previously seen. Their format makes for easy accessibility and their informal, slightly quirky approach makes for an enjoyable reading experience. So I was entirely prepared to like this new publication.

And in many respects I wasn't disappointed. The structure is ideal for the 'dip in' nature of most sexual health queries. The layout is clear, slightly magazine-like and therefore easy to read. The facts are generally accurate, up-to-date and highly useful. The later, more factual chapters cover the information ground comprehensively.

My objection is the fact that all too often the style descends into what I can only describe as 'hectoring', particularly in the earlier, less factual chapters. The authors seem mildly irritated with their audience – with the individual reader of the book but also, I suspect, with the sexual health consumer in general. Hence the book is full of *en passant* diatribes. "Stop measuring yourself against some arbitrary standard", "You only have to be wrong about [protection] once to pay the price", "One day you are going to wake up a really disappointed person with ... a new case of herpes", and so on.

This tone concerns me. Of course we want patients to understand the risks they take with regard to sexuality. But we don't want them to feel cowed which, frankly, was the way I felt after reading some parts of this book. I would much rather the authors had tempered their warnings with an attempt to get the reader 'on side' rather than stressing so often what mistakes the reader is making.

Hence, in summary, I can absolutely recommend this as a source book for more formal settings: to keep in a practice library for instant reference, or to support a confident patient who simply needs extra information. But for young people and vulnerable patients, I'd prefer to recommend something a little more sensitive and compassionate.

In short, while patients may need the facts and insights this *Complete Idiot's Guide* offers, they don't need to be treated like complete idiots, which is, sadly, what this book often does.

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