

Chapter 11

Intimacy Education: Integrating Eros into Culture (synopsis)

Intimacy education is the key to breaking the cycle of sexual abuse. Adults with good intimacy skills do not need to resort to coercion to satisfy their sexual and emotional needs. Children with good intimacy skills can resist and report attempted offenses. Conventional sex education presents facts and promotes values, but provides no way to integrate this information into the emotional and bodily reality of life as it is experienced. Sex education does not offer opportunities to develop intimacy skills.

Intimacy education is experiential. It involves learning how to be physically and emotionally present to another person; how to share one's own feelings and listen with empathy to another person's feelings; how to share physical and emotional vulnerability without violating boundaries; and how to give and receive respectful, nurturing, and pleasurable touch. Children need intimacy education appropriate to their age level; but before this can happen, their parents, caregivers, and educators need to develop their own intimacy skills so that they can share them with the children. The Human Awareness Institute is discussed as an example of an organization that has been successfully presenting intimacy workshops for adults and teenagers for more than two decades.

Ideally, intimacy education happens in the family throughout childhood, and especially during infancy and toddlerhood, when the way that the parents touch the child will become the model for how the child will touch other children. Intimacy education should take advantage of learning opportunities within the home, such as relationships with siblings and sleepovers with friends, and outside of the home, such as locker rooms and summer camps. Learning intimacy in a safe and structured environment gives children the skills they need to be responsibly intimate in unstructured situations, such as the erotic friendships discussed earlier in the book. How intimacy education is implemented will vary in different families and communities; programs will not succeed without the grassroots support of adults and careful attention to how the children are responding.

Children will inevitably be intimate with each other, in both non-sexual and sexual ways. Adults need to decide whether we want those experiences to be pleasurable and confidence-building, or painful and shame-inducing. By forcing children to keep their sexual interests and activities secret, our society favors the shame option. But when adults have healed their own sexual shame, they may have a change of heart toward children's sexuality. They may even encourage erotic friendships as a low-pressure context for developing intimacy skills.

With a little skillful coaching, intimacy comes naturally—and learning the etiquette and art of intimacy is much easier than unlearning shame.