

What Classical Education Tells Us About Sex Education

Our morally bankrupt culture sees sex as no more important, complex, or harmless than the ABCs. But it is unwise to teach the young that which is both beyond their understanding and harmful to their developing character. What American families need are educators who understand the true purpose of their craft and who possess a strong moral foundation...

In a small Dutch elementary school, a teacher sits with her students and asks, "Who here has been in love?" The children giggle, and hands are raised in response. Many questions come to mind when confronted by this real event. Why is the teacher asking her young students this adult question? Why do the children find the question amusing? Further, the children presume to understand the teacher's question, but do they really know what "love" is? Unfortunately, the author of a PBS article titled, "The Case for Starting Sex Education in Kindergarten," did not bother to ask any of these pressing questions.[\[i\]](#) She instead used the teacher's question to argue in favor of educating the young about sex.

This belief is not isolated. In fact, it is becoming worldwide orthodoxy. In 2016, the *Atlantic* reported that educators believe "children would be better off with a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality."[\[ii\]](#) For these advocates, kindergarten is the logical place to start. According to *The New York Times*, sex education must be implemented in childhood education for two reasons. The first is to combat an "irrational fear" or the "cultural belief that teaching young people about sex will cause them to have sex."[\[iii\]](#) Supposedly, this fear keeps administrators and educators from "providing young people with... sequential and honest sex education." The second reason is essentially to

combat and ideally eliminate childhood innocence. As the *Times* put it, “Withholding information about sex and sexuality will not keep children safe; it will only keep them ignorant.”

Yet the perpetual fervor for childhood sex education is not the only dark cloud in the sky. What is becoming more prevalent in the civic atmosphere is a denying of parental freedom to opt children out of sex-related lessons and activities. For example, *The National Review* highlighted a Californian teacher who held an in-school celebration for a gender-dysphoric boy. During the party, the boy symbolized his transition into girlhood by donning the attire and title of a young girl. Parents of classmates were never alerted to the activity prior to its occurrence. It is no surprise many parents were outraged. Under California law, parents must be forewarned about upcoming in-school sex education lessons and be given the option to opt their child out. However, although California is one of thirty-five states that require schools to give parents this freedom, the California state legislature excluded “gender identity” from the state’s notice and opt-out requirements.[\[iv\]](#) While this exclusion may indeed have been a coincidence, its existence nevertheless remains suspicious.

These issues—the growing movement towards instituting de facto childhood sex education and the government’s willingness to slyly deny parent’s freedom of choice—illustrate what Allan Bloom noticed in 1987: a pervasive cultural indifference. Because of the triumph of relativism, Americans no longer have any grounded understanding of “the real motive of education, the search for a good life.”[\[v\]](#) Instead, most Americans understand education as a trivial concern, or they see education as a means of amassing wealth. There is no longer any interest in ordering souls because the soul has no place in the Information Era. Introducing sex to children then is not an issue. The sooner they learn, the better, more sexually fulfilled lives they will lead as adults. For advocates of

childhood sex education, the good life has nothing to do with the love of wisdom. The good life in today's world has everything to do with instant gratification.

Yet despite the enormity of the storm, the classical understanding of education remains a viable solution to today's ignorance. This philosophy of education is outlined in John Henry Newman's [*The Idea of A University*](#) and especially Plato's [*Republic*](#), which Bloom recognized as "the book on education."[\[vi\]](#) In short, this view takes education to be an art of taming the soul's raw passions and forming them into something beautiful, something with order, symmetry, and depth. How is this accomplished? Plato suggests a musical education.[\[vii\]](#)

Indeed, Plato contends that a musical education is the most important form of education because it directly targets the soul. This is not an eccentric idea. Boethius spoke of a kind of music called "human music," which, unlike instrumental or cosmic music, formed a natural friendship between the body and soul.[\[viii\]](#) Bloom was a proponent of this philosophy, understanding music to be what balances human passions and reason. As he stated:

A man whose noblest activities are accompanied by a music that expresses them while providing a pleasure extending from the lowest bodily to the highest spiritual, is whole, and there is no tension in him between the pleasant and the good. By contrast a man whose business life is prosaic and unmusical and whose leisure is made up of coarse, intense entertainments, is divided, and each side of his existence is undermined by the other.[\[ix\]](#)

It would be difficult to find someone who prefers his mental state to be chaotic and disordered. Humans naturally prefer order, but order is unfortunately not natural. Order must be established, cultivated, and maintained. When in terms of the

soul, the young soul is not ordered and is thus driven to passions. If the soul is ever to be ordered, outside forces must act upon it and mold its parts into something better. This is the theory underlying Plato's conception of education, and it deserves to be explored, studied, and applied.

When Plato introduces musical education, he starts with a theory of beginnings. As Socrates addresses Glaucon and others, he stresses the "beginning of any job is of greatest importance, especially when we are dealing with anything young and tender." [x] Why is the beginning of childhood education so important? Because the young are "especially malleable" and conform to the mold impressed upon them. [xi] Thus, it does not make any sense to allow children to hear just anything from anyone. Unlike the good educator, others do not have the good of the child in mind. [xii] This good can only come about through the imitation of noble things. These are familiar to the good educator because he has studied what Plato calls "the rhythms of a life that is ordered." [xiii] Presenting these virtues to children would not be difficult. Simple observation told Plato children are master imitators, and this is a truth scientifically supported today. Thus, when teaching, good educators must expose students to noble things while letting the children know these are indeed good things. The exposure to what is courageous, temperate, pious, and free will undoubtedly begin the process of harmonizing the soul. This is because, by virtue of imitation, children will form habits which, if practiced beyond youth, become firmly established within the soul.

The *telos* of this form of education is to help students "quickly notice if something has been omitted from a thing, or if that thing has not been well crafted or well grown." [xiv] In other words, when a student's soul is properly ordered, he will be better prepared to understand the whole of a thing because he was introduced to its parts. For instance, Bloom believed poetry to be "what music becomes as reason

emerges.”[\[xv\]](#) To expose children then to poetry is to sow the seeds of independent thinking. Consider this stanza from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”:

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*[\[xvi\]](#)

In Ray Bradbury’s [Fahrenheit 451](#), the protagonist, Guy Montag, reads this stanza to his wife and guests. Bradbury’s description of the poetry’s effect is striking, “Mrs. Phelps was crying. The others... watched her crying grow very loud... She sobbed uncontrollably. Montag himself was stunned and shaken.”[\[xvii\]](#) In Montag’s world, the absence of thought is bliss. The reading of poetry then forces a woman, who is practically a child, to think for the first time. This experience is powerful because although children have no knowledge of meter, rhyme, rhythm, and symbolism, beautiful words remain beautiful nonetheless. They are awe-inspiring; they move the reader and listener to contemplate things above him even without his knowing it. The opposite is true of ugly things. Present a child with chaotic verses, and he will assuredly feel disgust.

However, Plato takes this idea one step further. He argues that this recognition of good and bad in the young is crucial for the developing soul because it prepares the child for higher learning in the future. When the child is no longer a child and is finally presented the reason why the things he loves are beautiful, “he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself.”[\[xviii\]](#) Much like the unification of melody and

rhythm, so the soul responds happily when it can finally see and contemplate the beginnings of beauty.[\[xix\]](#)

The lesson here is profound. Plato, in a sense, lays the foundation for what many modern educators believe: It is senseless to teach children the reasons behind things. Try and explain to a child why apples are sweet and be sure to mention cell walls and human olfactory membranes. Or try and convince a child the sky is blue because blue light molecules are easily scattered by the Earth's atmosphere. All the child really knows is apples are sweet, and the sky is blue because it reflects the ocean.

Where Plato differs from modern educators is in his caveat regarding what particularly should be taught to children. If Plato were alive today, he would undoubtedly play devil's advocate with those in favor of teaching children about sex. Yet it is unlikely he would conclude anything other than this proposition: It is unwise to teach the young that which is both beyond their understanding and harmful to their developing character. There are also the parents to consider. What are they to do when their son asks if he can be a girl? How to explain transgenderism and gender dysphoria to a five-year-old? How does a single mom explain the importance of lasting relationships and the true meaning of love to her four-year-old daughter? Instead of surrounding children in good music, today's educators seek to abandon the very thing that makes childhood precious: an innocent curiosity with life. This has been abandoned and replaced with a chaotic melody. Black is white; honey is sour; fire is cold; yes means no.[\[xx\]](#)

Yet it is because of this very tumult that Plato's ideas remain relevant today. In this chaotic world, Plato's vision of education offers something invaluable to young minds: an environment conducive to unparalleled growth and potential. What America does not need is more destroyed families, rising divorce rates, STDs and STIs, rapes, and teen suicides. These

all stem from somewhere, and that place is a popular, morally bankrupt culture that sees sex as no more important, complex, or harmless than the ABCs. What American families do need are educators who understand the true purpose of their craft and who possess a strong moral foundation. Such individuals can help children transition from imitation to habit and eventually to knowledge of good things. Students will learn about sex, but only when they are much older. Then they will be capable of understanding the reasons as to why sex is sacred and beautiful. While it would be foolish to believe that Plato's musical education is perfect, it is certainly more advantageous than the alternative. As John Keating put it, "There's a time for daring and there's a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for." [\[xxi\]](#)

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Notes

- [\[i\]](#) Melker, Saskia De. "The Case for Starting Sex Education in Kindergarten." PBS. May 27, 2015.
- [\[ii\]](#) Dreher, Rod. "Sex Ed In Kindergarten?" *The American Conservative*. April 29, 2016.
- [\[iii\]](#) Hauser, Debra. "Sex Education for Kindergarten and Beyond." *The New York Times*. May 8, 2013.
- [\[iv\]](#) Cleveland, Margot. "The Transgender Agenda Hits Kindergarten." *National Review*. September 04, 2017.
- [\[v\]](#) Bloom, Allan. [The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students](#). 25th ed. New York City, NY: Simon& Schuster Paperbacks, 1987: 34.
- [\[vi\]](#) Ibid., 12.
- [\[vii\]](#) It is important to emphasize that when Plato or

Bloom speak of a musical education, they are not referring simply to what is commonly understood to be music. Plato certainly devotes a significant portion of the [Republic](#) to a discussion of proper melodies, rhythms, and intonations. But to limit Plato's argument simply to the amusing vision of students being forced to listen to Mozart misses the crux of Plato's message.

- [\[viii\]](#) See Boethius' [The Music of the Spheres](#).
- [\[ix\]](#) Bloom, 72.
- [\[x\]](#) Plato. [Republic](#). Translated by C. D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004: 377b.
- [\[xi\]](#) Ibid., 377b.
- [\[xii\]](#) The good educator understands justice to be the best thing for the soul (Ibid., 612). The soul with justice is ordered, which means logos is the master of, not the servant to, the appetites.
- [\[xiii\]](#) Ibid., 400a.
- [\[xiv\]](#) Ibid., 402a.
- [\[xv\]](#) Bloom, 72.
- [\[xvi\]](#) Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." Poetry Foundation.
- [\[xvii\]](#) Bradbury, Ray. [Fahrenheit 451](#). New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1951: 97.
- [\[xviii\]](#) Plato, 402a.
- [\[xix\]](#) As Aristotle argues in the [Metaphysics](#), "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view of action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things."
- [\[xx\]](#) See Thomas Reid's [An Inquiry Into the Human Mind](#).
- [\[xxi\]](#) See [The Dead Poets Society](#).

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