

Impermissible lessons: What parents may *not* teach children about sex
Commentary on "Straying from the Flock"
Hannah Widmaier

In this commentary, I will not argue for or against the sex ed opt-out policy itself. Rather, I will assume for the sake of argument that the policy is morally permissible—meaning that (also for the sake of argument) we must grant that parents have the right to largely dictate their children's sex education. In pulling their children out of a public school sex ed class, they are exercising this right. Given these stipulations, Rachel's parents have moral standing to pull her out of the class, and Ms. Flynn has no right to interfere with this particular decision.

At the same time, most people (including those who sincerely support the sex ed opt-out policy) would agree that parents' right to largely dictate their children's sex ed is *not* the right to take any approach to their children's sex ed that they please. Here is a deliberately extreme and disturbing example of sex-related assertions that are morally impermissible to teach one's children: "Consent is not morally required for sex. It is morally permissible to have sex with someone whether or not they want it. If someone has sex with you without your consent, they have not done anything wrong and you have not been violated in any way."

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Rachel's parents are giving her this message. But the example is useful in demonstrating that parents do not have the right to conduct their children's sex ed in any way they please; some "lessons" are morally off-limits due to the threat they pose to the children and/or the children's future partners. One might also argue that, even if a child who is taught the above lesson never becomes a rapist or a rape victim, s/he is still somehow harmed by the lesson, because being badly mistaken about a serious ethical issue automatically constitutes "harm." But my main point stands with or without this second, less obvious argument.

So, I can now re-state my initial assumption in more precise terms. Parents have the right to dictate their children's sex ed, but there are limits on which lessons the parents can permissibly teach, and those limits are determined by the type and degree of threat that any given lesson poses to their children and to their children's future partners. It is reasonable to think that there might be impermissible lessons besides the one I listed above.

I argue that we should deem impermissible those lessons that prevent children from making sexual choices informed by regard for their own and their partners' well-being. These lessons include those that stunt children's regard for their own entitlement to respect -- e.g., "If someone has sex with you without your consent, they have not done anything wrong and you have not been violated in any way." They include those that stunt children's regard for others' entitlement to respect -- e.g., "It is morally permissible to have sex with someone whether or not they want it." And they include those that limit children's knowledge of the risks they and their partners face and of how to protect against those risks. Parents might limit their children's knowledge either by lying about the relevant information or by simply omitting it. Therefore,

total or near silence (particularly in parents who have opted their children out of sex ed in school) about sexual risks and protections qualifies as an "impermissible lesson." So does deception about sexual risks and protections.

Rachel's parents gave her an impermissible lesson in sex ed: by maintaining total silence about sex (while also opting her out of sex ed at school) and directing her to misinformation about sexual risks and protections, they limited her knowledge of the risks she and her sexual partner(s) face and of how to protect against those risks. By opting her out of sex ed at school and refusing to discuss sex with her themselves, they ensured that the option she was likeliest to resort to was her church's website, which is deceptive about how to protect against sexual risks. Of course, Rachel has access to many unreliable sources of information about sex; the church website is only one of them. But her parents played a part in directing her to the website by portraying the church to her as a trustworthy authority. If parents introduce some institution, like a church, as an important guiding force in their children's upbringing, then their children might reasonably turn to that institution as a reliable source of ethical and empirical information (much as they would turn to their parents).¹ The website's lie about condom effectiveness currently prevents Rachel from making sexual choices informed by regard for her own well-being. It is an impermissible lesson, and the school's sex ed opt-out policy should not protect it.

Therefore, Ms. Flynn is justified in rectifying the lie about condoms for which Rachel's parents are indirectly responsible. In doing so, Ms. Flynn would not be violating the parents' rights at all, since they never had the right to tell Rachel this particular lie in the first place. (Ironically, had Rachel not been impermissibly lied to, Ms. Flynn's hands might be more tied than they currently are.) Notice, however, that my argument has given Ms. Flynn only very limited leeway regarding what she may say to Rachel. Under my first assumption, Rachel's parents do have the right to opt her out of sex ed. So, I have only shown that Ms. Flynn is justified in discussing the information specifically mentioned on the church website. There might be other reasons that would justify Ms. Flynn in saying more! I just haven't addressed them here.

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¹ Indeed, one might argue that Rachel's parents have in this instance treated the church as a parental proxy for their daughter, whether or not they meant to.