Sexual Implications of Deaf-Blindness

Della Fitz-Gerald, M.A.
Max Fitz-Gerald, M.A.

ABSTRACT: For those individuals handicapped by both deafness and blindness, interpersonal communication and relationships are greatly hampered and restricted. This fact can better be understood when we examine the nature of the disabilities and their effect upon the learning about one's sexuality. We generally learn about our sexuality in three significant ways: (a) directly (from personal experience), (b) indirectly (from talking or reading about it), and (c) through observation (from listening to and watching others). When a physical and/or mental impediment interferes with this learning process, the more natural opportunities for learning about one's sexuality are limited and often not available. It is not difficult to imagine the possible affects both deafness and blindness have upon this learning process. When one's ability to read, talk, hear and see is impaired, it leaves only one primary source of learning for the individual, his/her experiences. This was reflected in the 1972 Grossman study that compared college students from Gallaudet College (the only liberal arts college for the deaf) and Pennsylvania State University students. According to this unpublished master's thesis the Gallaudet deaf students had less sexual knowledge, were more accepting of sexual myths and engaged in more sexual activity than the Pennsylvania State freshmen and sophomores with whom they were compared.

WHO ARE THE DEAF-BLIND?

In 1974, Dr. Robert Dantonna identified 4,414 children as being deaf-blind. He estimates that the number of children is nearer 7,000. He further estimates that there are approximately 45,000 deaf-blind adults in this country, or a total deaf-blind population of more than 50,000. He also estimates that 16 percent or 115,000 of the deaf population of this country have severe visual problems which could require that they take advantage of services designed to assist the deaf-blind population.

1 Della Fitz-Gerald is a Hearing Resource Specialist for the Prince George County Public Schools in Prince George County Maryland. Max Fitz-Gerald is a Sex Education Specialist for the precollege programs at Gallaudet College, Washington D.C.
SEX EDUCATION FOR THE DEAF-BLIND

In 1975 Mr. Carl Davis, of the Perkins School for the Blind distributed a survey to the two hundred and five agencies responsible for education of the deaf-blind children in the United States in an effort to determine the extent to which sex instruction was provided. Responses were received from one hundred and twenty-one (59 percent) of the agencies, which included both day and residential programs. Only ten (eight percent) reported the existence of a sex education program. Of these, five were day schools, four were residential and one provided both day and residential services.

When asked if the agency planned to implement a sex education program in the near future, eighty-two (68 percent) responded no, while twenty-two (18 percent) responded yes. Two (two percent) responded that they may implement a program and four (3 percent) were undecided. When asked if these facilities were considering such a program, twenty-one (17 percent) responded no, sixty (41 percent) responded yes, while eight (7 percent) responded maybe and five (40 percent) undecided (Davis, 1975).

From this data it can safely be concluded that minimal efforts are presently being made to provide a formal program of sex education for deaf-blind youth. This is not to imply that they are not receiving sex education, for they are, either good or bad. The question before us then is not whether to provide sex education, but “how,” to provide such instruction that will enhance the persons capacity for self-maintenance and development of meaningful and responsible relationships.

PREPARING THE DEAF-BLIND INDIVIDUAL
FOR ASSUMING ADULT LIFE ROLES

Preparing the deaf-blind person for assuming adult life roles begins with assisting and preparing the family for their significant role in this educational process. Since most individuals have not received training in a parenthood, the birth of a disabled child often results in a “disabled family.” Without proper assistance, both educationally and emotionally, parents often are not able to provide for the social, emotional, physical and educational needs of their handicapped child. Thus, it is imperative that good sex education begins with the family, since the family represents the first source of sex education for the child.

Special programs, schools and institutions often serve as the “home” of many deaf-blind children. Thus it becomes imperative that the staff and faculty who serve as “foster parents” receive appropriate training for their role as sex educator.

The authors are concerned about the degree and quality of training