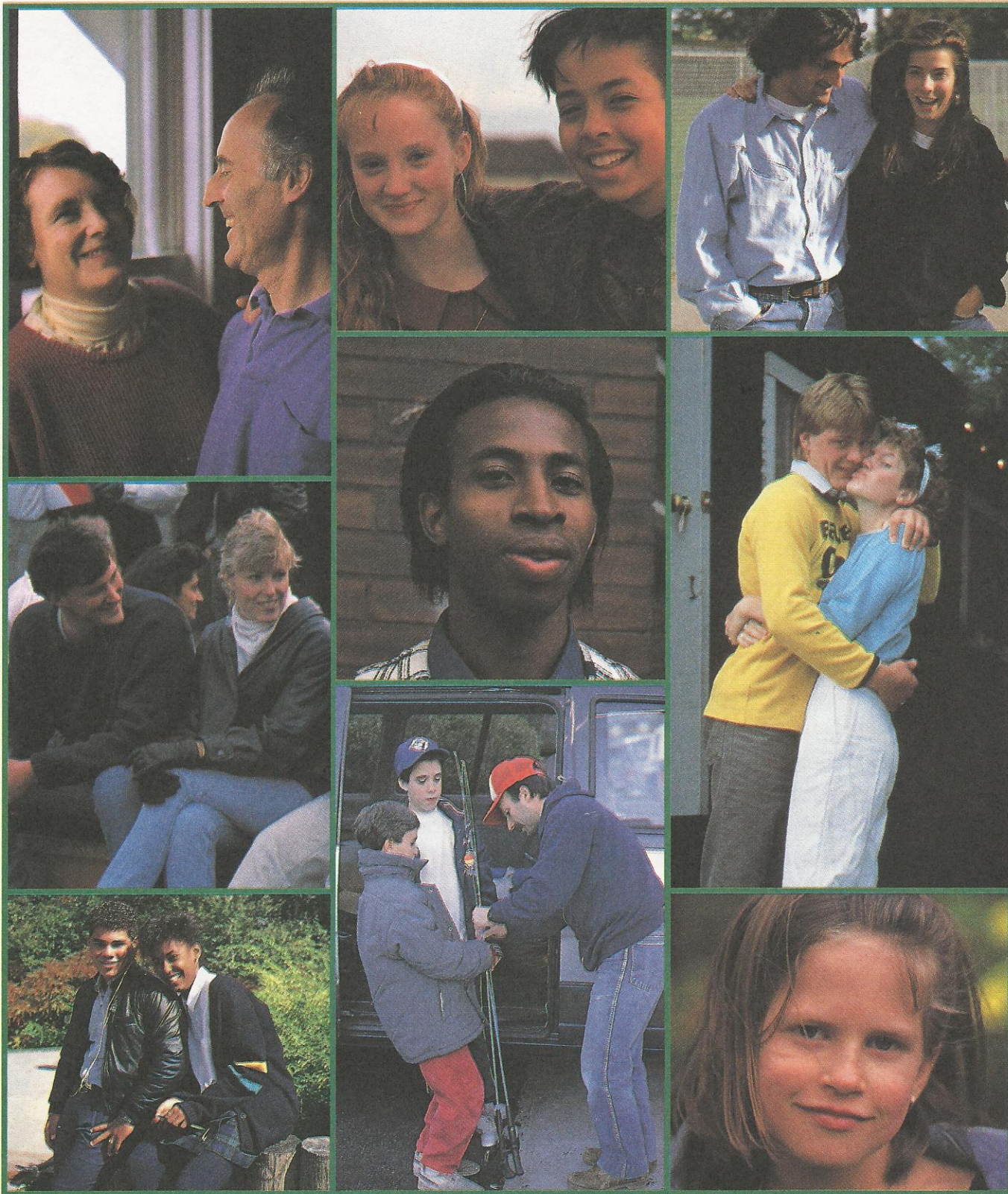


What is Sexuality?



Sexuality is expressed in and through our bodies, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, personalities, beliefs, and values.

What does it mean to be a person? Why are human relationships so important? How do we learn to live in relationship with others?

These are some of the personal and complex questions we have been exploring. Now we turn to another question about the human person — what is sexuality? It too is a question that is intensely personal and complex.

Each human person is created sexual. We are either male or female. We live in relationship with other people as sexual persons. Our sexuality, like our personality, is not something that we have; it is something that we are.

Sexuality is not the same thing as sex, sexual characteristics, sexual identity, or sexual roles. These are all aspects of sexuality, but they are only part of the picture.

- **Sex**, or gender, is determined by the sex chromosome from the father (X or Y) and the sex chromosome from the mother (X). Unlike the other major body systems, the reproductive systems of males and females are different. A baby girl will have female external and internal reproductive organs, while a baby boy will have male external and internal reproductive organs.

- **The sexual characteristics** of adult males and females are obviously different. In young children, these differences are apparent only in the external genitals. At puberty, male and female secondary sexual characteristics begin to develop and the differences between the sexes become apparent in the entire body.

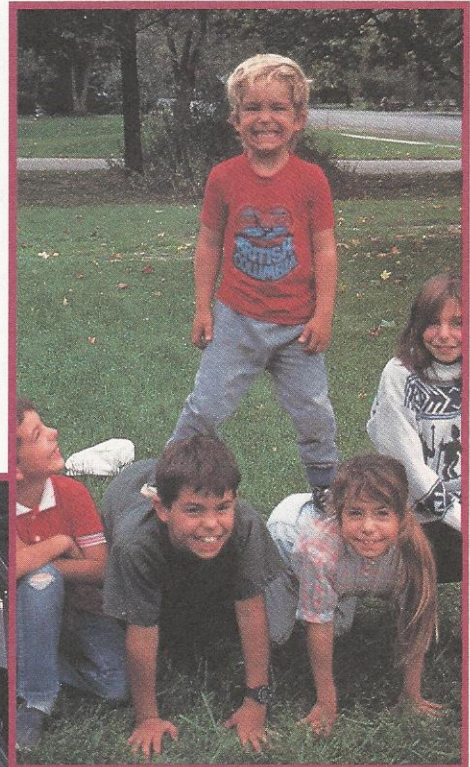
- **Sexual identity** is a person's understanding of herself as a female, or of himself as a male. Children first begin to have a sense of sexual identity when they are around two years old.

- **Sexual roles** refer to the way males and females are expected to act in a particular society. Depending on the society, sexual roles can be rigid or flexible. People learn about sexual roles from their families, friends, parish, members of various groups to which they belong, and media.

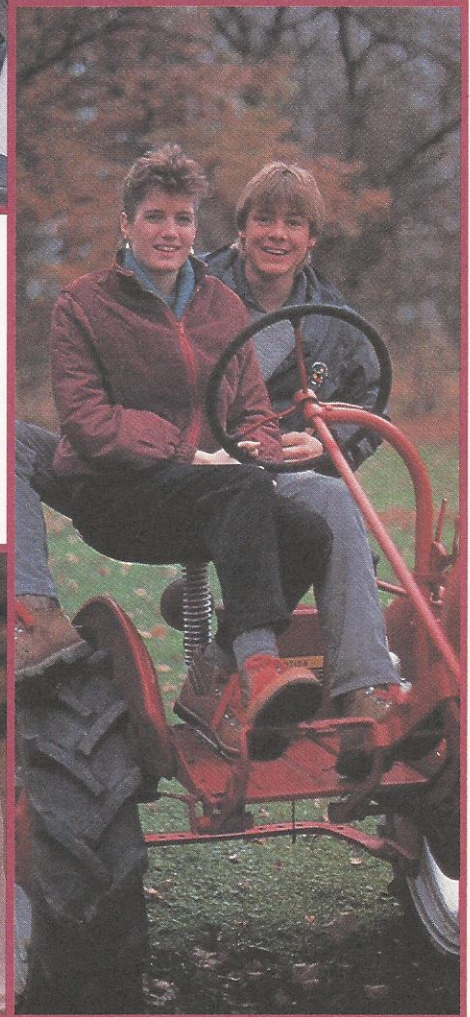
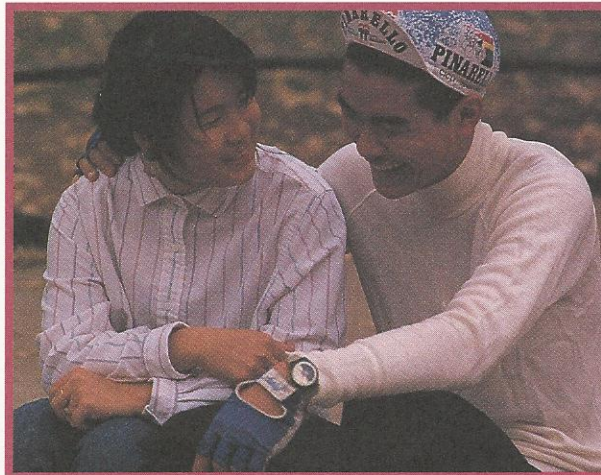
The full meaning of sexuality can only be discovered in the meaning of the human person. It is not just the body that is sexual; it is the whole person, the body-spirit, who is sexual. When a girl or woman describes herself, she says, "*I am* female," not, "I have a female body." In the same way, the boy or man *is* male, not someone who has a male body.

Understanding Sexuality

We express ourselves as males and females in different ways at different times in our lives. When children are very young they learn to relate to family members and friends. They form attachments to people and learn how to express these attachments. Gestures of affection, playing with friends, showing interest in other people, co-operation — these are all ways in which growing children express who they are as boys and girls with their family members and friends.



At puberty we begin to discover a new dimension to our relationships. As the body matures and becomes more adult, a strong physical attraction between males and females usually develops. Sexual attraction is a new experience that takes time to understand and to learn how to fit into our relationships.



With maturity, sexual attraction can grow into a deep, personal relationship between a man and a woman that leads to marriage. In marriage, a husband and wife give themselves to each other in total and intimate friendship. Sexual intercourse is a special expression of this gift. Without words, a husband and wife say to each other:

- I give myself to you, I accept you, I love you, I trust you, I will always be faithful to you, I will always forgive you, I accept whatever the future holds for us.

Acceptance of what the future holds includes the gift of fertility. Human fertility, which is the power to give life, is an essential part of sexuality. The first signs of fertility are experienced at puberty when the reproductive systems of males and females begin to mature. Like sexual attraction, this is a new experience for males and females that takes time to understand and accept. They have to become familiar with their changing bodies, and with the signs of their fertility.

The deeply committed relationship of marriage is the foundation on which a family is built. This is why the life-giving power of fertility is intended to be used only in marriage. In sexual intercourse, a husband and wife communicate not only their love, commitment, and sense of belonging, but also their willingness to accept the gift of fertility and their openness to the new human life that may be the result of their love.

You have, of course, been learning about sexuality since the day you were born. Your family members, your friends, and many other people have taught you a great deal about being male or female. Through your relationships, you have discovered how wonderful it is to be accepted, loved, and trusted; and you have learned to offer the gift of acceptance, love, and trust to others. Now you have a new task ahead of you: to learn how to integrate your developing sexuality into your life, and to live in harmony with it.

