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“Well, She’s Just Growing Up Dear”: 1950s Educational Films and Sex Education in The United States, Differences and Ambiguities¹

Favian Mostura

CREW Research Centre, Sorbonne Nouvelle University, France

Abstract

This paper investigates the delivery methods of sexual education films in mid-century American classrooms, categorized into subgenres including social guidance films, health films, and “shock” films, and emphasizes technical execution and underlying ideological messages. By analyzing specific examples of various sex-ed films and their distinctive characteristics, it explores how their messaging was crafted and conveyed. It highlights how sex-ed films from the late 1940s and 1950s, while generally age-appropriate, also exhibited gendered differences and, in some cases, employed bold, provocative imagery meant to warn teenagers about the consequences of inappropriate sexual activities. The author examines the complexities of educational cinema related to sexual education in postwar America in view of the cultural and educational dynamics of the time.

Cet article examine les méthodes de présentation des films d’éducation sexuelle dans les salles de classe américaines du milieu du XX^e siècle, catégorisés en sous-genres tels que les films d’orientation sociale, les films de santé et les films « choc », en insistant sur l’exécution technique et les messages idéologiques sous-jacents. En analysant des exemples spécifiques de divers films d’éducation sexuelle et leurs caractéristiques distinctives, l’étude explore comment leurs messages ont été élaborés et transmis. Il met en lumière comment les films d’éducation sexuelle de la fin des années 1940 et des années 1950, bien que généralement adaptés à l’âge des élèves, présentent des différences selon le genre et, dans certains cas, emploient des images audacieuses et provocatrices destinées à avertir les adolescents des conséquences des activités sexuelles inappropriées. L’auteur examine les complexités du cinéma pédagogique lié à l’éducation sexuelle dans l’Amérique d’après-guerre à la lumière des dynamiques culturelles et éducatives de l’époque.

Keywords

postwar America, sex education, educational films, social guidance, ideological messaging, gender differences

États-Unis d’après-guerre, éducation sexuelle, films pédagogiques, orientation sociale, messages idéologiques, différences de genre

Over the course of the first decades of the 20th century in the United States, educational films emerged as a new teaching tool, at a time when mass instruction was on the rise. Use of educational films also coincided with an increase in sex education, which had become a common phenomenon in US schools starting in the 1920s and 1930s, driven by an earlier initiative from the social hygiene movement born from the Progressive Era². This movement was an attempt to curb the spread of venereal diseases through educational material such as books, pamphlets, and films. Indeed, a public health campaign was in full swing by the 1930s and 1940s, prompting the production of educational films to warn people about venereal diseases, with examples such as *Know for Sure* (1941, the Research Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), and *To the People of the United States* (1944) produced as a response to cases of syphilis in the military.

Concomitantly, there was also a widespread use of film to educate Americans about sex. During World War I, educational films had been used for campaigns against the epidemic of venereal

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² The social hygiene movement was created at the behest of groups concerned with sexually transmitted diseases at the turn of the century. It notably adopted a mixed approach to preventing diseases, where medical information overlapped with morally conservative values to preserve public health by advocating sexual abstinence (Wuebker).

disease (“VD”) in the military. Gender-specific instructional films also emerged, and were used as a way to teach women about keeping “clean and neat” (Eberwein 16). During WWII, educational films made their way into the military as “training” or “instructional” shorts, and their proven efficacy meant that such films were widely adopted in other sectors at the end of the war (Orgeron 499). After WWII, “sex-ed” classes became more widespread across the country, starting at a local level rather than prompted by a federal recommendation, showing that, much in line with the emphasis on local decision making in the US education system, sex education was not defined by a unified national strategy or any agreed-upon standards (Freeman 64). Instead, there were experiments in specific courses whereby educators sought to expand the curriculum in their local school or community³. Question boxes, panel, class, and group discussions, as well as guests invited to speak on specific subjects, and, of course, films were all seen as tools for democratic participation that would help people understand and learn about sex, biology, and puberty, as well as about social relationships.

After WWII, with leftover film material and people looking for work, multiple film companies started to increase production, including the larger ones, Coronet Studios and Encyclopedia Britannica Films. After 1945 and throughout the 1950s, these companies and others produced films for schools, and among them sex-ed films.

In this article, I look at several American sex-ed films from the late 1940s and 1950s in order to showcase how they approached a variety of topics and how they differed in messaging and presentation⁴. I understand sex education as being an umbrella term encompassing various aspects of the sex-ed curriculum. As such, films in this article deal with sex hygiene, puberty, menstrual education, and disease prevention. During this period, such films neither aimed nor claimed to make up a comprehensive lesson that would deal with every facet of sexual education (Ghanoui). In addition to these “health films” dealing with sex hygiene, I also examine social guidance films, that is films that deal more with social interactions between teenagers than strictly focus on disseminating information (Alexander, Preface n.p.).

I examine the dual nature of mid-century sex education films, highlighting their mix of progressive educational strategies, on the one hand, and their reinforcement of normative gender roles, on the other. While these films often incorporated age-appropriate, gender-specific information and practical advice, they simultaneously upheld traditional social expectations about sexuality and behavior. As they were produced in a highly normative, gendered context, the films aimed to educate young people about puberty, health, and relationships while implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, warning them about the dangers of premarital sex, including disease and unwanted pregnancies. These films also faced criticism from religious and activist groups opposed to sex education in general. This approach aligns with the guidelines of the Hays Code, which heavily influenced media from the 1930s through the 1950s by enforcing rules on the portrayal of sex, violence, and morally questionable behavior using strict guidelines. Even if these films were not theatrical films, the code’s restrictions still likely contributed to the film’s indirect treatment of sexual activity and disease, opting for suggestion over explicit depiction.

I argue that this ambivalence, between progressive intent and adherence to traditional values, shaped the unique qualities of these films. I will first analyze sex education films that sought to inform audiences about sex-related topics, focusing on how they navigated age-appropriate and

³ One such experiment was found in the semi-rural community of Toms Rivers, New Jersey, where home economics classes were expanded to encompass interpersonal relationships in order to promote a healthy home (Mordan 140).

⁴ The films mentioned were preserved in various university archives such as the Kansas University Libraries for Centron Corporation films, or University of Oregon Libraries for *Human Growth*, but many of them are now available online either on the Internet Archive as part of the Prelinger Collection, courtesy of Rick Prelinger, or on YouTube.

gender-specific content in five films dealing with puberty and menstruation. Then, I will examine two social guidance films dealing with dating, and two cautionary films dealing with diseases, showing the manners in which these films were meant to warn their audience about unwanted consequences relating to interacting with the opposite sex.

The films in this article were selected with a variety of criteria in mind, including number of views in their respective archives, and supposed impact. For example, *Human Growth* (Eddie Albert Productions, 1947), won multiple national and international awards and was shown in thousands of schools and over twenty countries (Peterson and Aronson 57). *The Story of Menstruation* (Walt Disney Productions, 1946) was estimated to have been viewed by over 93 million women “either in school or in some single sex setting” (Brumberg 47). Coronet films on dating were mainstays of the social guidance genre, and Centron Corporation, producers of *Dance, Little Children* (Centron Corporation, 1961) was a leading educational film company in the Kansas region.

Informing Pupils: Age Appropriateness and Gender Specificity

In the period under study, film use in school was at the forefront of pedagogical innovation. It naturally evolved from the Progressive education movement⁵, and in that sense can be considered politically “progressive” as an extension of that movement. The introduction of psychology in schools through the “mental hygiene” movement also can be considered as progressive, as it emphasized mental development and adjustments to prevent mental illnesses (Anderson 7). Pioneering films reflected a growing societal interest in educating teenagers about their bodies, specifically targeting teen girls. Some of those films, especially those pertaining to female bodily functions or puberty in general, would be shown to a same-sex group of children separate from the opposite sex. They sometimes fell in line with the general view of the early repressive goal of the 20th-century social hygiene movement, while others discussed the matter frankly and openly (Moran 34).

Among the productions that impacted sex education in the postwar period, two became prominent and enjoyed wide acclaim, *The Story of Menstruation* (Walt Disney Productions, 1946) and *Human Growth* (Eddie Albert Productions, 1947), which both dealt with puberty⁶. These sex-ed films were for the first time providing sexual education to younger audiences through the novel medium of film, selecting topics based on their gender-specific targeted audience, with different subject matter and presentation for boys and girls.

Human Growth laid the groundwork for experimentation of sexual education in visual form. The film, produced by an Oregon-based company, Eddie Albert Productions, founded by Hollywood actor Eddie Albert, was reviewed in mainstream magazines (*Life Magazine*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*), and was the first sex-ed film to be shown in public schools across the US. It was sponsored by a non-profit organization working with the University of Oregon (the E.C. Brown Trust) and produced with the help of Oregon psychology professor Lester F. Beck, thus using expert advice that gave legitimacy to the film’s content, something that became a common tool for educational films throughout the 1950s. Indeed, educational films were often written with the collaboration of experts, usually in psychology, medicine, or family planning, when dealing with issues relating to sexual education, in order to help write the script, but also to lend authority to the material. Around 2000 copies of *Human Growth* were circulated, and this short

⁵ The Progressive education movement, derived its ideas from 19th-century philosopher John Dewey, and thus supported a more active approach to education by emphasizing activities and taking into account a more personalized approach to learning, rather than the previous knowledge-based philosophies.

⁶ *The Story of Menstruation* was shown to 105 million girls and young women, and remained in use for more than thirty-five years (Freeman 85). The film *Human Growth* was widely approved by parents and teachers (Freeman 15).

received multiple documentary awards for its technical excellence, its innovative approach to sexual education, as well as its pedagogical impact (Eberwein 3), demonstrating that sex education had become a more common and widely accepted pedagogical topic.

In *Human Growth*, George, a teenager, is at home reading about Native Americans and how some of them have clothes, and others do not. “Only the grown people have clothes on” he muses, as drawings of the half-naked Indigenous people are shown on screen. The film transitions from a depiction of George’s white middle-class family, representative of the idealized model displayed for Americans in political discourse, the media, and advertising – and moves to a classroom setting where a teacher is preparing to show an instructional film to a group of 8th-grade students. The scene unfolds for both the characters in *Human Growth* and for the actual viewers watching the film, creating a layered viewing experience. The nuclear family model primes the viewers to accept the message, creating a template for further discussion surrounding the situation of many of the students, while diagrams and animations shown in the latter part of the film offer a more scientific framing for questions about puberty. *Human Growth* directly addresses viewers at the end of the film, a technique frequently used in educational films shown in schools, itself inherited from earlier training and instructional films (Alexander; Eberwein). The use of cinematography techniques borrowed from Hollywood was innovative, as was the general integration of film into school curricula, making the medium itself a significant step forward. Engagement with the audience was an essential part of sex-ed films, and the scientific approach in *Human Growth* contributed to its success. The film uses clear and scientifically accurate language alongside relevant diagrams, avoiding overt euphemisms in its depiction of puberty and reproduction.

However, while it avoids traditional appeals to emotion common in earlier social hygiene films, it does not fully escape biases or inconsistencies. For example, *Human Growth* opens with a depiction of an “uncivilized Indian” figure, contrasting this with the white middle-class nuclear family typical of its intended audience (Shapiro 47). Although this negative stereotype reflects the racial biases of the time, the inclusion of an Asian boy in the foreground during a classroom scene suggests some degree of diversity within the student body at Theodore Junior High School in Eugene, Oregon (Eberwein 115).

The film was also praised for its accessibility to younger students, particularly through its use of simple, stylized drawings to depict bodies, much like George’s book on American Indians. Still, despite its progressive aspects, *Human Growth* maintains a specifically gendered perspective: girls are described in vague, tautological terms as becoming “more feminine,” while boys are characterized with greater precision, such as developing “broader shoulders” and “more muscular” bodies (Freeman 76). This contrast highlights how the film, while innovative in its scientific tone, reflects and perpetuates traditional gender norms.

As mentioned earlier, reactions to *Human Growth* were very positive, but inevitably fostered differing views. For instance, following one screening in a California school, the Pasadena School Board resigned, even though parents agreed with its methods (Eberwein 116). On the other hand, an article in *Life* showed that the teen audience approved of the film. “The transition from the movie classroom to their own was easy to take” reads the article, indicating the “film-within-a-film” technique was a success. Questions by students after viewing the film dealt with babies and puberty, but never sex per se (*Life* 62). *Human Growth* was also criticized by various groups, including the Catholic Church in the state of New York, who tried to get it banned from public schools on religious grounds for “unmoral, rank, bad sex education for school children” (Eberwein 116). Moreover, these films and their reception also demonstrate that controlling sexuality in youth was perceived as a way to prevent problems and dissension in a society supposed to remain united in the context of the Cold War. Indeed, as Elaine Tyler May’s theory of “domestic containment” suggests, social forces perceived as threats to national unity during the Cold War were often managed through strategies that reinforced traditional values and

behaviors. These films can be seen as part of this effort, aiming to regulate youth sexuality as a means of maintaining societal cohesion. By promoting controlled and sanitized messages about puberty and reproduction, they reflect broader attempts to align personal behavior with the political and moral imperatives of the time (May Location No. 373).

For younger audiences, such techniques (using animated or cartoon sequences and portraying children of similar age groups) were one way to make the film accessible. Another similar example is found in *The Story of Menstruation*, an animated educational film for girls, which was also generally well-received. It was sent to the Brussels World Film Festival as a non-theatrical film submission (Ed Screen June 1947 330), and Disney paid for a two-page advertisement in the September issue of *Educational Screen*⁷, where it was lauded as “[accomplishing] the extraordinary feat of teaching something essentially serious while preserving an air of good cheer and relieving the tension by unexpected humor” (Ed Screen September 1947 382-383).

The film presents animated sequences with a female voice-over explaining the science behind growth, hormones, and menstruation. It begins with references to the pituitary gland and explains how the body sends the “maturing hormone through the bloodstream to the ovaries,” before moving on to practical tips for dealing with periods. In doing so, the film seems to position itself as scientific, while still vague, for example when girls are told to “just use common sense” when talking about doing exercise during menstruation. These indications are contrasted with the biological diagrams and animations portraying menstruation shown in an informed, but rigid and dry manner.

Another element of the film’s disconnect appears when the narrator explains that “you can do practically everything you normally do”, a statement juxtaposed with scenes of a man and a woman dancing. After a brief scene showing them switching to a more energetic dance, the narrator chastises them: “Come now, we said ‘practically everything’!” The film delivers a series of injunctions addressing how women should present themselves, often linking outward appearance to inner bodily functions. “It’s smart to keep looking smart,” the narrator claims as a woman powders her nose, adding, “that well-groomed feeling will give you new poise and boost your morale,” along with suggestions to get “fresh air and sunshine.” In another scene, the narrator urges, “Do something about that slouch – it’s just as bad inside as it looks outside.” This advice draws a direct connection between a woman’s posture and her inner health, with the narrator suggesting that standing up straight can help with feeling better during her menstruation.

The narrator goes on to say, “Some girls have a little less pep,” while we see a woman brushing her hair, looking dejected in front of a mirror, “but don’t let it get you down. After all, no matter how you feel, you have to live with other people.” This final comment reflects a mentality urging girls to endure discomfort quietly, as they are ultimately responsible for maintaining composure for the sake of others. While the film grants women a degree of visibility by addressing their experiences, it confines them to a narrowly defined, gendered space where their behavior and presentation are controlled by societal norms. The film’s scientific veneer lends authority to this messaging, allowing the “common sense” of the time to prevail over the reality of severe and often incapacitating period pains, a reality that has since been widely documented but remains absent in the film’s narrative. We do not see the women’s individual perspectives on these messages; rather, the film upholds a normative framework that reinforces traditional expectations of femininity.

These moments, one of the aforementioned elements of “good cheer” praised in the *Educational Screen* advertisement, seem to reflect the cultural hesitance to fully embrace the reality of

⁷ *Educational Screen* was a specialized trade periodical that dealt with visual education, lasting from 1922 to 1956.

women's health and bodies, through a cautionary and cautious approach that resonates with the societal norms at the time around topics dealing with dating and relationships, generally with an understated attitude towards women's sexuality (Coontz 62).

The reception by teachers and students as well as parents and medical professionals were equally replete with praise: *The Story of Menstruation* was deemed "excellent" by the renowned *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Secondary-school "teachers welcome[d] it", according to the *Educational Screen* ad, which explained that it had been shown to "literally hundreds of thousands of students since its release in November of '46" and that it had "register[ed] approval" in junior and senior high schools. The ad also provided information on ordering prints, which underlines the high demand for the film in the fall of 1947. Much along the line of the general trend of group discussions, girls are described as "participat[ing] in discussion readily [...] with no trace of embarrassment", while parents are quoted saying "I wish I could have seen such a film when I was a girl".

A booklet, *Very Personally Yours*, produced by Kotex, a company that made menstrual hygiene products, was handed out after showing the film. Contrary to the frankness touted in the *Educational Screen* blurb, the booklet does sometimes minimize or euphemize functions of the human body as a way to "disarm" the conversation and turn it into something less dramatic. Page 1 reads "Here, you'll find authentic answers to all you've needed to know. How to smile through "certain" days" and on page 10 it is written that "[...] your calendar can help you keep track of any swervings 'off the beam'". Still, it contains a list of practical elements (a calendar, examples of exercises to relieve cramps, tips and tricks, a list of "dos" and "don'ts" ...), albeit as part of an ad for the Kotex company. The link between private sector companies like Kotex, which produced this material, and the film, shows the blending of commercial interests with educational content, allowing companies to strategically market products under the guise of health education (Smith 59).

The exploration of gender-specific narratives is perhaps most effectively illustrated through the contrasting approaches to sex ed in *Molly Grows Up* (Medical Arts Productions, 1953), and *As Boys Grow* (Medical Arts Productions, 1953). Both of these films address puberty in their own manner, highlighting the distinct ways in which their scientific content was tailored to different genders. A third film, *Social Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* (Crawley Films for McGraw-Hill, 1953)⁸ offers a synthesis of gender-specific films by portraying how each gender experiences adolescence in different ways.

Molly Grows Up was developed with input from four consultants with PhDs⁹, yet the tone of the film is far from academic; adopting instead what could be described as a paternalistic approach. Unlike *The Story of Menstruation*, which targets girls specifically with a female narrator, *Molly Grows Up*, like *Human Growth*, treats puberty as a family matter within its dramatized narrative. In the story, Molly, anxious about getting her first period, turns to her mother for guidance. Her mother, however, avoids satisfying Molly's curiosity, instead stressing, here again, the importance of good posture while on her period, perhaps both as a way to sidestep the conversation and to align with general health advice also seen in *As Boys Grow*. The emphasis on standing and sitting up straight recurs throughout *Molly Grows Up* and *The Story of Menstruation*. "Please sit up, Molly," her mother urges as Molly lounges on the couch. "If you sit and stand straight, that will give your organs inside your body room to function better, and that will make you feel better." While Molly learns the relevant information

⁸ While Crawley Films was a Canadian production company based in Ottawa, its films were still shown around the United States through distribution circuits.

⁹ At the time, most consultants with PhDs were men, as relatively few women held doctorates outside fields like home economics or family science. However, women in these fields were occasionally brought in as experts. For this film, the consulting team included two biologists (PhDs) and two medical doctors (MDs). While two of the consultants are known to be men, the genders of the other two are unspecified.

from the nurse, the film still exemplifies a societal trend for girls to learn about sex from family. A 1950 study of 307 college girls and their mothers revealed that “three-fourths of [...] young women received their first sex information from their parents or relatives, compared to less than half of the mothers,” thus demonstrating generational change (Landis 452).

In this 14-minute film, as with *Human Growth*, diagrams are shown, albeit only at the 9-minute mark when the school nurse draws the ever-present cutaway drawing of a uterus and explains how menstruation functions. While she mentions what happens when a sperm cell inseminates the ovule, the question of how a sperm cell would get there in the first place is not mentioned. Molly then ponders “is it true people can tell when you’re menstruating?” to which the nurse replies “No.” Instead, the nurse emphasizes “personal cleanliness and daintiness,” stressed through her suggestions about nail care and the recommendation to “wear [their] prettiest dress.” She thus seems to be paradoxically reassuring Molly while also asking her to look different at this particular time. This emphasis on appearance and posture during menstruation reflects the societal obsession with how women should present themselves. On one hand, it can be seen as shameful and degrading, implying that girls need to conceal their menstruation by enhancing their appearance. On the other hand, contemporary beliefs suggested that maintaining proper posture and looking one’s best could have health benefits, such as easing menstrual discomfort by relieving pressure on reproductive organs. This focus on one’s appearance is the same type of advice as in *The Story of Menstruation* where the narrator recommends girls stand up straight, and stop appearing sad or despondent while on their period. The only other on-screen question from the audience after this presentation is from a girl wondering if she can still dance while on her period, the nurse replying with a list of “Dos” and “Don’ts” mirroring the Kotex *Very Personally Yours* list of points that came with *The Story of Menstruation*.

Molly Grows Up received positive reviews; it competed for the Golden Reel Award of the First American Film Assembly and Festival¹⁰, and Educational Screen ran advertising for the film in the months following its announcement. Much like *The Story of Menstruation*, the reviews and advertisements lauded the practicality and down-to-earth nature of the film, especially since it was packaged in a relatable narrative structure. The film, sponsored by a hygiene company (Personal Products Corporation) in a more muted, less overt manner than its Disney-produced predecessor, was meant to foster discussion (Ghanoui). *Molly Grows Up* underscores two elements that were present throughout sex-ed classes across the country: besides providing a narrative, the film also portrays a class with children asking questions to their teachers and reacting to an in-class presentation, as when the nurse explains what menstruation is¹¹. Seeing other students asking questions on the screen was perhaps perceived as a way to entice girls to do the same after viewing such educational films, especially as a topic such as menstruation was still often considered to be a private affair and because some girls may have been reluctant to discuss this with their teacher.

As Boys Grow, a film also dealing with growing up, but for boys this time, as implied by its title, is a natural candidate for comparison to *Molly Grows Up*. As a sex hygiene film by the same company as *Molly Grows Up* (Medical Arts Productions, known for its straight-forward sex-ed material), it portrays a candid view of puberty, and still manages to mention menstruation. In the film, a male gym teacher explains the ins and outs of puberty to a group of young boys, along with scenes of said teenagers interacting among themselves, perhaps also to encourage a similar discussion after the film’s viewing. One scene opens with two young boys

¹⁰ The Golden Reel Award was part of the 16mm Chicago Film Festival, first held in 1954. It featured 12 categories dedicated to judging nonfiction films, including “Medical Sciences,” “Safety,” “Training,” and “Geography and Travel.”

¹¹ A similar situation was created in *Human Growth* during its film viewing.

sitting on the grass, one saying “I had a wet dream last night,” and the other one inquiring what that is, to which he replies “Oh, you know, it’s when sperm comes out of your penis. A sort of sticky stuff, the guy’s part of a baby.”

The male gym teacher, serving as the authority figure, is a far cry from the nurse in *Molly Grows Up* (even though the actor is also the one playing the father in that film). Here, the teacher takes on a more informal role, coaching youths in a variety of different sports, and answering their questions in a gymnasium. This informality is underscored by a boy walking past, asking “are you having a meeting?” to which the coach replies “No, just talking. Sit down if you want to!” The coach then shows a diagram of male genitalia, going over the usual topics of hormones and function, with the difference that the view is again more frontal, culminating in his explaining the process of ejaculation while writing the word on a blackboard, before explaining masturbation and clearing up misconceptions amongst the youths. One last scene shows the coach explaining menstruation. Unlike the films mentioned above, this one actually mentions the sexual act, with the coach saying “Oh, you don’t have to be thinking about sex to have an erection”, and then, during his explanation on menstruation and the fertilization of the egg, explaining the act of sexual intercourse in a simple, no-frills manner, with the help of a cross-section diagram.

These films underscore a different approach between the way male and female adolescent issues were dealt with: *As Boys Grow* is an example of presenting masturbation and male puberty as something quite normal and not shameful, and it addresses issues in a straightforward and responsible manner. “They can be called wet dreams,” says the instructor, referring to accidental ejaculation. Male puberty and male masturbation are presented as perfectly normal and nondramatic, whereas movies focusing on women never addressed female masturbation, focusing instead on the restrictive aspects of their femininity (menstruation). While neither directed nor written by the same people or crew, both films were released by *Medical Art Productions*, a production company based in San Francisco, California, and this difference in how sex ed was approached for boys compared with girls within films approved by the same company is still worth noting.

Finally, *As Boys Grow* also deals with some of the social aspects of growing up, with the coach mentioning how boys will want to invite girls for a dance, making it quite innovative at that time. It is careful about explaining the biological functions of the opposite sex, something *Molly Grows Up* does not do (Bryson 298). Boys were permitted to gain some sexual experience, often euphemized as “sowing one’s wild oats,” whereas girls were expected to remain chaste until marriage. Although forms of affection like necking, petting, and kissing were accepted as part of a codified courtship system, the implicit message was that while boys could explore sexual boundaries, girls were expected to uphold purity. As cultural historian Beth Bailey noted, “dating was an unequal relationship” (Bailey 81).

The film *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence*, part of a series entitled *Adolescent Development*, about different aspects of developmental psychology in teenagers¹², offers an alternative view on teenage changes. The film introduces Bob, a young boy raised in a non-nuclear, single-parent household by his widowed mother. This setting serves as a backdrop for exploring shifting childhood gender roles, such as Bob’s transition from playing with girls to fitting in more with boys, a change that pleases his mother, as indicated in the film. Mary’s story contrasts with Bob’s; she interacts with both sexes during her childhood. Her mother plays a crucial role in educating her about sex, aiming to protect her from the misinformation that may be spread among her schoolmates. The film portrays Mary’s journey into adolescence. Her mother’s response to her husband’s concern about Mary’s quietness and daydreaming (“Well, she’s just

¹² This film was based on a text by psychologist Elizabeth B. Hurlock titled *Adolescent Development* (1949), and was produced for the McGraw-Hill Company, a textbook company, in 1953 (Bryson 305).

growing up, dear”) is followed by her discussing menstruation and sex candidly with her daughter, setting it apart from *Molly Grows Up*, in which the mother was reluctant to discuss this issue at length with her daughter.

The film highlights how teenagers acquire information about sex and puberty from various sources. In one scene, Mary and her friends gather on the grass, exchanging questions and misconceptions about sex, such as “If you marry your first cousin, do you have a deformed baby?” or “Does kissing have anything to do with having a baby?” None of these questions are answered in the scene; the only certainty offered is that “it’s safe to have babies in hospitals.” This lack of clear information illustrates how young women were sometimes left with confusion, their curiosity about sexual health remaining unaddressed when talking to their peers. In a study covering 307 college girls in 1947, sociologist Paul H. Landis concluded for instance that parents thought the best way to learn about sex was from the parents (Landis 452), but that “youth more often sought premarital advice and more often discussed the problem of children with their prospective mates” (Landis 455).

This scene also underscores how girls primarily received information about reproduction indirectly, through peers, rather than through explicit instruction. As Betty Friedan would later critique, such socialization primed young women to envision motherhood as their ultimate purpose (Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*). Mary’s questions about babies and her interactions with friends reflect this conditioning: even in adolescence, girls were directed towards thinking of motherhood as their necessary future. The film *Molly Grows Up* depicts Mary’s gradual development: from spending time with female friends, to admiring and even “crushing on” a female celebrity¹³, and eventually showing an interest in boys, marking her transition into adolescence.

In a similar vein to *As Boys Grow*, *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* follows Bob as he learns about puberty. “He already knows about nocturnal emissions and masturbation,” the narrator reads out, and once again, the boy’s football coach serves as a role model and authority figure, as Bob’s mother is a widow. A notable scene involves Bob’s mother discovering his sketch of a naked man and woman, reflecting the film’s candid approach to depicting sex. The narrator explains “When Bob was 16, his interest in girls was becoming more than... casual”, before Bob’s mother quickly hides the drawing back where she found it and subsequently becomes more and more frustrated and wary of her son’s behavior. “No, I don’t know where he was going, he didn’t say, not to me anyway”, she says to someone on the phone. In another scene, she spies on Bob who is on the phone, and later, she watches him leave in a car with a girl. The exhaustion and frustration from the mother are compounded by her status as a widow, in an example of a portrayal of a non-nuclear family. She faces the dual challenge of raising her son, and of providing the guidance a father might traditionally offer, especially in areas where a father’s influence is typically significant, such as puberty or dating.

As often true at that time in educational films, *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* portrays marriage and the nuclear family as the main objectives of dating and interaction with the opposite sex, reaffirming established gender norms, and, despite the transgression of showing cartoon nudity on screen in 1953, it never alludes to sexual activity between the two teenagers. Nevertheless, *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* stands out for its comprehensive and empathetic exploration of adolescent development, addressing the complexities of this development with an open and forward-thinking perspective (Bryson 313).

Through the examination of these films, it becomes evident that early educational films tried to strike a balance between factual information and tactful presentation, ensuring that the content

¹³ This admiration illustrates the societal expectation for girls to emulate idealized feminine figures. The “crush” signifies Mary’s internalization of cultural standards of beauty and femininity, serving as a stepping stone in her personal development. It is not meant to have a sexual connotation.

was approachable for a young audience while also not overstepping their objectives depending on which aspect of sex education they were dealing with. *Molly Grows Up*, *As Boys Grow*, and *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence* portray differences in the way sex and puberty were taught to the two different sexes: girls were taught with an emphasis on modesty, social etiquette, and appearance, even if frank discussions were still had, albeit only in a medicalized way, with authority figures such as the nurse in *Molly Grows Up* and the mother in *Social-Sex Attitudes in Adolescence*; boys were presented with a franker explanation of the physical changes in their bodies. This contrast highlights the different social expectations and underscores the cultural attitude towards adolescent development, but also encompasses the medicalization of sex education: For girls, the advice did not fully address their questions about reproduction and avoided discussing specific topics like the various types of menstrual products¹⁴. These films mainly emphasized the biological processes but still avoided many potential questions on feminine hygiene products, intercourse, pregnancy or childrearing.

Warning the Youth about Sexuality

The other major objective of sex-ed films was to warn and inform youth about the possible undesirable consequences of sex, dating, and similar behaviors. Using educational films as prophylactic tools to simultaneously educate and caution viewers about undesirable behaviors was not a new practice. *Reefer Madness* (1936) was an early and quintessential example of portraying, on film, the perceived dangers of drugs and of an immoral lifestyle, as theatrical examples of educational messages were the norm (Schaefer, *Learning with the Lights Off*, 3502). Shown in churches, select theaters, and community centers, *Reefer Madness*, which details the progressive decline into drugs of the main protagonist, famously ends with a high school principal pointing at the camera and urging the viewers to “tell [their] children” about the dangers of marijuana use, as these same words appeared simultaneously on the screen¹⁵. As an early 20th-century, low-budget cautionary film, *Reefer Madness* exemplifies how fear of drugs was linked to concerns over juvenile delinquency, emphasizing personal responsibility as a solution. Widely shown again in the 1950s, the film resonated with Cold War anxieties about youth vulnerability, reflecting a growing public fixation about juvenile delinquency and the perceived moral risks facing adolescents. These films took women’s needs into account and were considered progressive at a time when teenage culture was evolving and teens were gaining independence from parental control. They were also created with input from experts. However, from a contemporary perspective, they upheld a narrow, normative view aligned with the hegemonic gender norms of the era.

In the postwar decades, amid rising rates of venereal diseases and significant changes in sexual practices in the United States, a consensus emerged about the necessity to provide sex education in schools. However, this educational initiative exhibited a paradox: students were indeed to be taught about sexuality, but within limits. For example, sexual intercourse was hardly mentioned in educational films (Freeman 94). These types of restrictions were influenced by various factors, including the rise in premarital sexual activity and out-of-wedlock pregnancies (Coontz 39). Despite the clear indication that parents and students alike wanted to know more about certain “uncomfortable” topics such as premarital sex activity, rape, abortion, and masturbation, the lack of trained teachers and pushback from some political and religious advocacy groups hindered progress. As historian Susan K. Freeman writes, “several programs developed in the

¹⁴ The tampon, created for commercial use by Tampax in 1936, specifically, had to overcome a popularity problem, as did menstrual cups. It was not until 1944 that one quarter of women would adopt the use of tampons (Goldberg).

¹⁵ This ending shows a continuum between techniques used in *Reefer Madness* and films such as *Human Growth*, in which the audience is also addressed directly.

1940s and 1950s eventually caught the attention of the right, which decried what it considered the communist, humanist, and anti-Christian values of leading sex education authorities". More than 20 years after *The Story of Menstruation* was produced, a conservative pamphlet complained about how children were learning about sex in sixth grade (Freeman 148). The debate over sex education intensified in the 1960s and 1970s with the introduction of a comprehensive sex education curricula.

Kinsey's influential reports about the sexual life of Americans (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, in 1948, followed by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, in 1953) showed mainly that "premarital sex tended to produce better marriages" (Kaledin 109). Such assessments demonstrated that, indeed, Americans had sex before marriage, contrary to the attitude that was often reinforced in educational films, which avoided any reference to premarital sex or chastised teenagers for their choices, for example showing "bad girls" who dated too early or too much, or who became pregnant, and "bad boys" who dated too many women. Furthermore, educators were alarmed by a shift in dating culture. Teens were increasingly "going steady" at an earlier age, a significant change compared to the "rate-and-date" of the Great Depression, when teenagers were encouraged to experiment with different dates, sometimes even at the same time, rather than commit to one partner (Bailey 22). Indeed, the "dating and rating complex" outlined in 1930s sociology hinged a woman's popularity on the number of dates she had. While popularity in men was associated with material wealth such as money or having a car, a woman's popularity depended on her being around popular men. Educational films like *What to Do on a Date* and *How Much Affection?* reflect these societal norms by reinforcing traditional gender roles and advising girls on how to maintain their reputations. This is seen in a *Senior Scholastic* issue in 1944, a magazine for teenagers, in which a girl from Greensboro, North Carolina explains that, "Going steady with one date, is okay, if that's all you rate", meaning that women who were rated lower would be relegated to "going steady" (only dating one person) instead of being able to attract many prospective suitors. This, combined with an ever-decreasing age at which couples were married (in 1939, the average marrying age for women was 23.3, but by 1959, 47 percent were married before 19) meant teenage practices of dating became even more relevant to sex educators (Bailey *OAH Magazine of History*).

Contrary to these widespread ideas among teenagers about dating and popularity, educators felt the need to foreground the more lasting consequences of dating that could result from sexual intercourse. Among the educational films dealing with sex ed, teaching teenagers about sex and topics surrounding sex such as puberty or dating, of course, meant dealing with the practical consequences of sexual intercourse, as expressed in the three following films: two social guidance films, *What to Do on a Date* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1950) and *How Much Affection* (Crawley Films for McGraw-Hill, 1958), and two sexual hygiene films: *The Innocent Party* (Centron Corporation, 1959), and *Dance, Little Children* (Centron Corporation, 1961). *What to Do on a Date* and *How Much Affection* show – that sexual education also encouraged abstinence, while both *The Innocent Party* and *Dance, Little Children* navigate the issue of syphilis.

While social guidance films, unlike health or biology films, were centered on providing a solid framework for teenage interaction, much like *The Story of Menstruation* or *Molly Grows Up*, Coronet films, such as *What to Do on a Date*, approached the matter with a rigid mindset, clearly outlining "dos" and "don'ts" that would lead to a supposedly healthy lifestyle in a way that was somewhat vetted and that was approved by health authorities (Bryson 444). In that regard, Coronet's film *Dating Dos and Don'ts* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1949) was recommended by an American Social Hygiene Association report entitled *Suggestions for Preparing Teachers in Education for Personal and Family Living* (Eberwein 117). The content of *What to Do on a Date* itself is coherent with previous examples of sexual education material in that it offers advice to teens about certain aspects of puberty, fitting in, growing up, and

interacting with the opposite sex, without ever showing any acts of physical intimacy or dealing with sexual relationships and their consequences.

In *What to Do on a Date*, teen Nick Baxter wants to take Kay to the movies, but since she has already seen the film he suggests, he proposes attending the high school scavenger sale instead. Throughout the film, advice is offered on suitable date ideas, such as “a bike trip,” “a weenie roast,” or “a baseball game,” mirroring other Coronet films like *Dating Dos and Don'ts* released the previous year. The narrator approves each idea, emphasizing how group activities help teens get acquainted while avoiding one-on-one situations (Smith 224).

The film's script reveals the creators' intentions: among the four general objectives listed, the first is “To convince the audience that there are many interesting activities for dates—activities other than petting, necking, etc.,” which are deemed too openly sexualized. Another objective states that “fun can be had without [...] heavy love making, etc.” Notably, the teaching points omit any mention of physical intimacy, even in cautionary or negative terms (*What to Do on a Date*, 1950). This deliberate avoidance underscores the film's emphasis on promoting wholesome group activities to prevent situations that might lead to inappropriate behavior.

In contrast, *How Much Affection?* directly addresses the question of appropriate physical boundaries in a relationship. It poses questions such as “How much affection should there be between a couple that is going steady? How far can young people go in petting and still stay within the bounds of social mores and personal stand?” (Walters). This film grapples with issues that *What to Do on a Date* deliberately sidesteps, reflecting different approaches to discussing teen relationships and intimacy.

As previously mentioned, in the 1950s, teenagers were not entirely discouraged from showing affection but were expected to limit themselves to practices like what was then described as “petting” or “necking.”¹⁶ Furthermore, on a date, “the man paid for everything and the woman was thus indebted to him” (Bailey 81). Viewed through a feminist lens, these subtexts imply that dating was structured to prevent young women from appearing too forward or sexually available. By promoting group activities as the “safe” option, *What to Do on a Date* suggests that any one-on-one time is inherently risky and potentially “improper” especially for girls.

How Much Affection portrays a young teenage couple, Mary and Jeff, who grapple with their emotions in their burgeoning relationship. While there is obvious affection between them, their physical desire toward each other is shown as potentially disruptive to their relationship. The film opens with Mary coming home in a hurry after a date with her boyfriend Jeff, while Jeff chases after her, up to the doorstep of her house. Afterwards, Mary is shown in much distress, ruminating over whether or not she went too far that night, and explaining to her mother how the situation almost got out of hand. As the viewer learns, Mary and Jeff “parked”, meaning that they stopped the car somewhere where they could be alone, and it is understood that they almost engaged in sexual intercourse. Mary's mother comforts her by having a more reasonable reaction, and explaining that their behavior simply got out of hand because of physical desires that warped the moral ideal of love and affection, which serves as a strong basis for marriage. By explaining what is “right” and “wrong”, Mary's mother acts as an authority figure warning her daughter about the dangers of letting emotions take over, but she still accepts Mary's agency by telling her, “you'll have to work out your own best way to make your emotions work for you, and not against you” (*How Much Affection*, 1958). Jeff, the next day, apologizes to Mary for his actions, with both young teenagers eventually sharing responsibility for their actions the previous night. Importantly, the film does not factor in the concept of consent as it is understood today. Consent is portrayed implicitly, placing the responsibility on Mary to set boundaries,

¹⁶ In the context of sex education in the 1950s, “petting” and “necking” were terms used to describe levels of physical intimacy among teenagers. According to historian Beth Bailey, exact definitions varied, but it was widely understood that “necking” referred to caresses above the neck, while “petting” involved caresses below.

rather than emphasizing mutual agreement and respect between both parties. This understanding of consent as the absence of a refusal rather than the presence of enthusiastic agreement is complemented by the emphasis on self-restraint and adherence to moral guidance rather than open communication and mutual agreement. This perspective contributes to an understanding of how educational materials of the era reinforced certain expectations about gender roles and interpersonal relationships.

Acting as the counterpart to the main couple are Eileen and Frank, two teenagers who went too far in their relationship. They are portrayed as teen parents who had to make personal career sacrifices in order to raise their child. In a scene where Mary and Jeff run into Eileen, they all make small talk, with Eileen mentioning the positive aspects of married life. However, this is contrasted with the onscreen images depicting a much different reality. Frank is shown as unable to get out of bed, in one scene, and lazing around on the couch, in another. The only comment Eileen makes to mitigate her feelings is “sometimes I wish we had had more time to work things out”, acting as a cautionary tale for Jeff and Mary. The messaging in the film is unambiguous: unrestrained teenage intimacy can lead to an early pregnancy, which will in turn lead to a much more difficult life for a young couple, and the way to avoid this is by adhering to stricter boundaries and avoiding physical intimacy altogether (Bryson 324).

The trend of social guidance films showed sexual abstinence, or at least sexual continence¹⁷, as the valid method of establishing relationships. Whether adults knew that high school students were engaged in sexual activity or not, the social guidance and educational film material aimed to be nonconfrontational and sidestepped issues that would have perhaps provoked negative reactions from parents and from various organizations.

However, while the nuclear family model could be threatened by premarital sex or teenage pregnancies (Coontz 39), it could also be endangered by another unintended consequence: venereal diseases. Even with large-scale screening programs and penicillin, syphilis remained an issue at midcentury. This increased awareness of the issue can be attributed to a general complacency of the public due to the availability of penicillin and other antibiotics, as well as a slowing down of public health campaigns put in place during both World Wars (Green *et al.* 2001).

Educational films naturally addressed the matter of syphilis, with *The Innocent Party* and *Dance, Little Children* serving as prominent examples. Both films, directed by Herk Harvey and commissioned by the Kansas State Board of Health, aimed to foster prevention and provide a dire warning about venereal disease. While *The Innocent Party* begins with a narrative approach, focusing on the teenage protagonist Don and his implied sexual activity with Betty, it shifts in the second half to a more science-based framework. The film features a doctor explaining syphilis with textbook-like visuals, including images of chancres and congenital syphilis. However, even in this scientific context, the film emphasizes Betty’s shame and despair (“Right now, I’d rather be dead”) far more than Don’s responsibility. This juxtaposition underscores the gendered moral standards that pervaded such films, where girls were shamed for their perceived failings, while boys were treated with less judgment (Neuhaus 39). The combination of scientific information and moralistic shaming was a hallmark of these educational films, reinforcing societal double standards about sexuality.

In *Dance, Little Children*, a syphilis outbreak is shown in the fictional town of Oakdale, where two teens, Hal and Lynn, are living contrasting lives. Lynn is portrayed as a naive girl from a modest family, while her boyfriend Hal is a wealthy, carefree teen who takes risks by sleeping around and attending parties. The film reinforces the double standard already evident in *The Innocent Party*: Hal’s reckless behavior is depicted as adventurous and even typical for young

¹⁷ Here, “continence” refers to the general restraint in sexual activity, as defined by early social hygienists, and not as *coitus reservatus* as it is typically understood today (Moran 49).

men, whereas Lynn's chastity and innocence are emphasized, placing the burden of moral responsibility on her. This contrast underscores the gendered expectations that these films perpetuate, with young women judged more harshly for their perceived failings while young men are given more leeway to "experiment."

The film focuses specifically on the social aspect of contracting syphilis. Parents in Oakdale violently reprimand and blame their children, with one father even disowning his daughter in front of the health inspector. The film centers on Hal and Lynn, and the stark contrast in their cases of contracting syphilis. Tailored by age and divided by gender, the films conveyed differing messages. Boys were depicted as future protectors and providers, with an emphasis on physical development and responsibility. Girls, however, were encouraged toward modesty, personal hygiene, and preparation for roles as wives and mothers, reinforcing traditional expectations of femininity and decorum. This is evident in how Lynn's family understands and cares whereas Hal's family threatens the doctor. In its presentation, *Dance, Little Children* weaves multiple narratives into one, insisting on simple, caricatured characters that make it easier for the audience to understand the story; in this regard, it is more comparable to *What to Do on a Date* than the more biology-based *The Innocent Party*. The contrasting stories in the film show that diseases such as syphilis can affect anyone, regardless of their social status. Different reactions from the parents and families also aim to promote education and empathy over repressive behavior.

Conclusion

Mid-century educational films played a pivotal role in shaping sex education in the United States. They often used diagrams and illustrations to "depersonalize" sex, making the subject less explicit and more socially acceptable. By integrating social aspects of adolescence – like interactions with the opposite sex and disease prevention – these films reflected an evolving approach to health and morality in education.

This indirect approach to sexuality likely stemmed from a desire to avoid controversy and parental backlash, as direct discussions could be seen as too provocative or morally questionable. While this method provided a structured way to convey sensitive information, it also led to incomplete and biased education. Despite teenagers being increasingly exposed to references to sexuality outside of school (in magazines, movies, and music for example) the films attempted to shape students' understanding of sexual health within the confines of mid-century moral codes (Bailey 78).

The impact of these films was both progressive and limited. They offered an authoritative platform to introduce important topics but often failed to provide comprehensive, inclusive education (Anderson 8). To fully understand their significance, future research could explore how students and educators received these films. Investigating their reception might reveal the extent to which they resonated with teenagers or were dismissed as outdated moral instruction. Moreover, understanding their influence could shed light on the role they played in the subsequent sexual revolution of the 1960s.

All in all, 1950s sex education films emerged from a desire to better inform teenagers about bodily changes and sexuality in a transforming society. Their diverse approaches (age and gender specific, informative, preventive, or alarming) reflect the period's balance between progress and conformity. These films contributed to shaping youth expectations and understanding of sexual health, and they may have laid groundwork for the more expansive sexual education curricula that followed.

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Favian Mostura

Favian Mostura is a PhD candidate in American studies at Sorbonne Nouvelle University under the supervision of H el ene Le Dantec-Lowry. His dissertation entitled " l ements de socialisation de la jeunesse am ricaine dans les films p dagogiques (1945-1970)" (Elements of Socialization of American Youth in Educational Films (1945-1970)), examines the place of American educational films in a context defined by major social and demographic changes, the Cold War, and the rise of various social movements. His publications include "What About Juvenile Delinquency? (1955) From Hoover to educational films" (*Revue Fran aise d' tudes Am ricaines*, 2024, forthcoming). He is also co-editor of *Pour une soci t  meilleure? La litt rature prescriptive aux  tats-Unis, entre mise en conformit  et approche  mancipatrice*, with Christen Bryson and H el ene Le Dantec-Lowry, to be published in 2025 by Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Favian Mostura est doctorant en civilisation am ricaine   l'Universit  Sorbonne Nouvelle, et travaille sous la direction d'H el ene Le Dantec-Lowry. Sa th se intitul e «  l ements de socialisation

de la jeunesse américaine dans les films pédagogiques (1945-1970) » porte sur la place des films pédagogiques américains dans un contexte marqué par des changements sociaux et démographiques majeurs, par la guerre froide et par la montée de différents mouvements sociaux. Parmi ses publications, on compte : « What About Juvenile Delinquency ? (1955) De la réponse de Hoover au film pédagogique » (*Revue française d'études américaines* (à paraître, en 2024). Il a aussi co-dirigé l'ouvrage *Pour une société meilleure ? La littérature prescriptive aux États-Unis, entre mise en conformité et approche émancipatrice* avec Christen Bryson et Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, à paraître en 2025 aux Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle.