



# REPORTS & COMMENT

NOTES

## THE BIG QUESTION

“CAN YOU HOLD things when you’re dead?”

“Daddy, is cheese vegetables, or what is it?”

“Why am I not a grown-up? I’ve been here for so many years.”

These questions aren’t the big question; they’re just regular questions. You can answer them while parallel parking or while holding a crying baby in one arm and trying to use the cardboard tube from a roll of paper towels to scoop up ten pounds of spilled birdseed after tipping over the birdseed container while trying to move it someplace where it would be less likely to tip over. The exact wording of your answer makes no difference. Responding incorrectly will not condemn the four-year-old asker to decades of fruitless interrogation by psychotherapists.

Here’s the big question: “How do babies get started?”

For various psychological reasons most people feel uncomfortable describing sexual intercourse to young children. Given this fact, you’d think that grown-ups would have settled long ago on a standard explanation that could be printed in several languages on small cards and, say, tucked into people’s electric bills every month. When a child asked the big question, you could hunt up one of these cards in the pile of stuff on your desk and read the explanation in the same halting monotone that police officers use to inform suspected criminals of their rights. If a child felt cheated by this skimpy dodge, you could shrug

and say, “Gee, this is the only card they gave us.”

“Why don’t you ask your mother someday when the two of you are standing in the checkout line at Stop & Shop?” is another possible response. (Or, “Hey, I was just about to ask *you* the same thing!”) But evasiveness merely postpones the day of reckoning. The time always comes—as it did recently in our house—when the big question must be met directly.

“Well, uh, a baby starts from a tiny, tiny egg, much smaller than the eggs in the refrigerator, uh, uh—honey?”

“Yes, well, uh, yeah, there’s this special place inside the mom, and—gee, what say we go get some ice cream?”

All the experts say you shouldn’t give young children more information than they’re really looking for. People who

haven’t graduated from nursery school don’t want or need to know about the part played by popular music and after-shave lotion. Just give them the same sort of innocently inadequate answer you’d give if they asked how the TV works.

The trouble is that young children are too inquisitive and too observant to be satisfied for very long with vague half-truths. They want *data*. When my sister was dressing for a party not long ago, her three-year-old son came into the room and demanded, “Turn around and let me see that no-penis.” You can’t buy off someone like that with a story about the stork.

For various psychological reasons I don’t feel comfortable revealing the exact explanation that my wife and I finally gave our daughter. It contained perhaps two pieces of information that I might have considered “good” at her age, but it left the mechanical side of the problem entirely unexplored.

Because of the incomplete nature of this explanation, we know that the big question is going to come up again, probably sooner than we expect, in some decidedly more paralyzing form. If we had any sense, we’d be polishing our script right now. But we’re not. I suppose we’re clinging to the hope that it will all be covered in kindergarten.

One thing I realized while wrestling with the big question is how essentially unbelievable the big answer is. The way plants get started is fairly plausible; the way people get started is not. It sounds like science fiction. And the most remarkable thing about it is that you scarcely have a chance to catch your breath before the result of it is cornering you in the kitchen and asking you to explain the trick.

—David Owen

