



***It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, Gender, and Sexual Health* by Robie H. Harris, illustrated by Michael Emberley**

ISBN: 9781536207200 (Hardcover); 9781536207217 (Paperback); 9781536216127 (Ebook)

Candlewick Press, 1994 (newest edition published 2021)

\*Age Range: 10 and up (Suggested by Publisher)

Grade Range: 5–8 (Recommended by *School Library Journal*)

## BOOK SYNOPSIS

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When children wonder about sex, where will they go for the answers? Providing accurate, lucid, unbiased answers to nearly every conceivable question children may have about sexuality, *It's Perfectly Normal* is here to help. From conception and puberty to birth control and AIDS, it is a refreshingly open and thorough presentation of the facts of sex—both biological and psychological—which children need now more than ever. Throughout, two cartoon characters, a curious bird and a squeamish bee, reflect the diverse feelings children often have about sex. Packed with warm, age-appropriate illustrations, often humorous but always scientifically correct, *It's Perfectly Normal* offers children the reassurance that the changes and emotions they experience while growing up are perfectly normal.

*It's Perfectly Normal* has been a trusted resource on sexuality for thirty years. Rigorously vetted by experts, the 2021 edition is the most ambitiously updated edition yet, featuring to-the-minute information and language accompanied by new and refreshed art. Inclusive and accessible, *It's Perfectly Normal* provides young people with the knowledge and vocabulary they need to understand their bodies, relationships, and identities in order to make responsible decisions and stay healthy.

## REVIEWS AND PRAISE

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★ “A wonderful guide for young adolescents setting sail on the stormy seas of puberty. Packed with the vital information they need to quell fears and make wise decisions.” —*School Library Journal*, **starred review**

★ “Caring, conscientious, and well-crafted.” —*Booklist*, **starred review**

★ “Intelligent, amiable, and carefully researched.” —*Publishers Weekly*, **starred review**

★ “One of the most unintimidating and informative sex books to come along for this age group.” —*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, **recommended** and **starred review**

★ “A terrific teaching tool that just may help slow the spread of sexual disease and ignorance.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

★ “Wherever there is disagreement, careful attempts have been made to be as objective as possible. The book will serve as a useful tool in the sex education curriculum.” —*The Horn Book*, **starred review**

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“Informal, wide-ranging, candid, and funny. . . . A younger child can enjoy the art. . . . An independent reader can seek definitions in privacy. Preadolescents can test their knowledge. And adolescents can give a superior smirk while secretly learning what they most need to know about sexual survival.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“A family-friendly guide to everything your kids ever asked you about sex, but you were afraid to answer.” —*Child Magazine*

“Reliable basic information is provided about both the mechanics and the consequences of puberty, sexual activity, birth control, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases.” —*Parenting*

“Utterly contemporary and comprehensive. . . . Highly recommended for talking your way through just about any embarrassing interrogation your ever-curious kids can devise.” —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“A frank and funny compendium that includes unbiased and up-to-date information . . . all explained in jaunty and accurate full-color art depicting people of many races, cultures, sizes, and ages.” —*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

“*It’s Perfectly Normal* answers more pre-adolescent questions about sex than any others on the shelf, and it does it gently, scientifically, and with humor.” —*The Press-Enterprise*, Riverside County, California

“Conversations with kids about sex are about as welcome by most parents as dental surgery. . . . Robie H. Harris has made it easier with *It’s Perfectly Normal*. . . . The book, for ages 10 and up, is sophisticated, comprehensive, reassuring.” —*USA Today*

“*It’s Perfectly Normal* gives growing children a chance to read an honest and explanatory view of their developing bodies. The text and pictures will give them a chance to understand and value themselves. I recommend it to parents, children, and adolescents. They will love it!” —T. Berry Brazelton, MD, founder of Brazelton Touchpoints Center, Boston Children’s Hospital, and Joshua Sparrow, MD, coauthors of *Touchpoints: Birth to Three* and *Touchpoints: Three to Six*, Boston, MA

“*It’s Perfectly Normal*, as well as Harris and Emberley’s books for younger children, are some of the best tools available to promote family communication about critical topics related to sexuality. We know from research that when families communicate about sexual and reproductive health topics, preteens and teens make healthier decisions. *It’s Perfectly Normal* will spur parent-child communication about essential topics like puberty, sex, relationships, sexual orientation, gender identity, and more. In today’s world, where young people are bombarded with messages from many sources, having this carefully crafted, age-appropriate, and engaging book is a gift to us all.” —Leslie M. Kantor, PhD, MPH, professor and chair, Department of Urban-Global Public Health, Rutgers School of Public Health, Newark, NJ; former vice president of education, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, New York, NY

“*It’s Perfectly Normal* remains one of the most useful, accessible, and inclusive resources for talking with youth and families about sex, gender, relationships, and values. These conversations help young people learn how to make safe and healthy choices and live their lives with integrity. *It’s Perfectly Normal* is the perfect catalyst to start these conversations.” —Melanie Davis, MEd, PhD, CSC, CSE, Our Whole Lives program manager, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA

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“If you have ever found it difficult to talk to your child about sex, or even if you find it easy, this book will be an invaluable friend. The quality of the information it provides is superb. Its language and illustrations speak in a direct, nonjudgmental manner and present diverse families, diverse relationships, and diverse bodies.

“Harris and Emberley cover everything a young person needs to know about sexual health, including how to safely use the Internet by providing strategies for finding reliable information and ways to prevent potential hazards of Internet use. It will draw in tweens, teens, and parents and totally engage all.” —Angela Diaz, MD, MPH, Jean C. and James W. Crystal Professor, Departments of Pediatrics and of Preventative Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; director, Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center, New York, NY

“Now more than ever, America’s preteens and teens in every community across our nation need the latest and most accurate information about sexual health as they go through the challenging ups and downs of puberty and adolescence. *It’s Perfectly Normal* is the go-to book for every young person. Why? Because it educates our youth about sexuality in the most honest and respectful manner and does not shy away from giving them the very information they are looking for and need.” —Marc H. Morial, president and CEO, National Urban League, Inc., New York, NY

“At last! A book that tells preteens and teenagers what they need to know about sex without turning off the less sophisticated, turning on the more sophisticated, or offending the moral values or sensibilities of parents and teachers. *It’s Perfectly Normal* is informative and interesting; reassuring and responsible; warm and charming. I wish every child (and parent) could have a copy.” —Penelope Leach, PhD, author of *Your Baby & Child* and *Children First*, London, England

## AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

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- An American Library Association Notable Children’s Book
- A *Booklist* Editors’ Choice
- A *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Winner
- A *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* Blue Ribbon Winner
- A *Horn Book* Best Book of the Year
- A New York Public Library 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing Selection
- A *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book of the Year
- A *Parenting* Reading Magic Award Winner
- A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children’s Book of the Year
- A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

## MEDIA AND RESOURCES

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- [Chapter Samples](#)
- [PEN America Article](#)
- Challengers may present quotes from the book out of context to try to convince others that this book is not appropriate for young readers. Here are some quotes from *It’s Perfectly Normal* to help make the opposing case:

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“If you have more questions or need further information, most always it can be very helpful to talk with someone you know and can trust—a parent, doctor, nurse, teacher, school counselor, therapist, or clergy person.” (A Note to the Reader)

“You may wonder why it’s a good idea to learn some facts about bodies, about growing up, about sex, about sexual health, and also about gender. It’s important because these facts can help you stay healthy, take good care of yourself, and make good decisions about yourself as you are growing up and for the rest of your life.” (page 1)

“There are some things about sex and sexual intercourse that are important to know and remember:

- It makes sense to wait to have sexual intercourse until you are old enough and responsible enough to make healthy decisions about sex.

- Every person, no matter what their gender or how young or old they are, has the right to say no to any kind of touching—even when one person is older, or a lot older, or stronger, or a lot stronger than the other person.” (page 10)

“No matter what some people may think, it’s still important for every person to treat all people with respect.” (page 16)

“Waiting to have sex until one is old enough to take good care of a baby makes good sense. The surest way not to become pregnant is to abstain from—not have—vaginal sex.” (pages 61–62)

“Here are some things you need to think about when you go on the Internet.

There can be a lot of inappropriate, weird, confusing, uncomfortable, creepy, scary, or even dangerous websites that you can end up on when looking for information. This can happen if you end up on a website by accident, or on purpose, that has material you were not expecting. . . . That’s why it’s very important to check with a trusted adult—your parent, or a teacher, librarian, therapist, school counselor, doctor, nurse, or clergy person—to make sure the website you are going to or have just gone to has accurate, truthful, and up-to-date information that is based on scientific and medical facts.” (page 88)

“It’s very important to remember to treat others with kindness and respect when online and in person, and to treat others the same way that you want to be treated.” (page 92)

“Everyone makes mistakes and has bad judgment once in a while, and you probably will too. But most of the time, you can and will make responsible choices— ones that are good for you, right for you, and healthy for you and your friends.” (page 107)

## **RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES**

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Statement of Support from the Children’s Book Committee of PEN American Center:

“We know that librarians and educators such as you put much thought, care and time into the selection and purchase of books. You conscientiously read reviews and deliberate over which books best serve the young people who are your readers. We applaud librarians for supporting young readers’ right to choose and to have access to the many different voices and images that are part of our world.

“As writers we have a deep respect for children’s minds and imaginations—their need to understand themselves and the world around them. Yet we know that books for young people are the ones most often taken off shelves because of a single complaint or, more harmfully, simply never put on library shelves for fear of

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controversy. Books must be accessible for any readers. Young readers come to our libraries and schools looking for honesty in fiction and nonfiction. Sometimes they come upon books that are important to them without even realizing what they are looking for.

“We feel a bond with the librarians, teachers, parents and journalists willing to engage in the sometimes trying process of absorbing a book into the library collection which is difficult for some members or even a single member of the community to accept. Particularly when books stimulate a difference of opinion, it is essential that these differing views be faced within our democratic traditions. This is especially important for the young people still learning to practice these traditions. If young people come upon something in a book they disagree with, they have the right to close the book, or to speak up or write about their opinion. But they have to learn that they don’t have the right to keep someone else from reading a book with a different point of view.

“No matter the intimidation and pressure from those who rush to ban what they disapprove of or fear, we would support and insist on young people’s right to free access to books and ideas. We must insist again and again. If we fail to do this we put ourselves in danger of losing these rights.”

Letter of support from the original editor of *It’s Perfectly Normal*, Amy Ehrlich:

“In 1992 when the manuscript of *It’s Perfectly Normal* first came to me at Candlewick, I felt immediately that it was an extraordinary piece of work. The entire text and artwork eloquently reflected Robie H. Harris’s and Michael Emberley’s commitment to the health and safety of young people. The research for the book has been extensive and impeccable, and in fact Robie and Michael continued to interview experts in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, child development, education, and parenting the entire time they worked on it with me and up until its publication.

“Before committing Candlewick to publishing *It’s Perfectly Normal*, I looked at many other books on sex education that had been published since the 1970s. It was clear to me that *It’s Perfectly Normal* was badly needed for young people coming of age in the 1990s. It dealt with subjects of immediate importance and concern to preteens and teenagers in a remarkably accurate, thorough, balanced, and honest way.

“When the book was published, it received starred reviews from such publications as *School Library Journal*, the *Bulletin for the Center of Children’s Books*, and *Booklist*. It also received many accolades, including being an American Library Association Notable Book, a *New York Times Book Review* Best Book of the Year, and a *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Book. And yet the very qualities that distinguish *It’s Perfectly Normal*—the nature of its subject matter and the thoroughness and honesty of its approach—have also meant that the book has been challenged.

“Teachers and librarians have been forced to defend *It’s Perfectly Normal*, making certain that it is available to young people who are seeking it or who are in need of the information it contains. Pressure from members of a community—or even from one member of a community—who believe this information should not be accessible to young people can make the teacher’s or librarian’s attempts to keep the book on their shelves uncomfortable or worse. And yet access to information is a right that must clearly be protected in a free society.”

[The Glen Ridge Public Library board](#) unanimously rejected an appeal to have several books, including *It’s Perfectly Normal*, removed from library shelves:

“Laura Hoge, clinical director of Spectrum Health in Montclair—‘In the last few years, I have spoken to teachers, doctors, social workers, counselors, school board members, the list goes on. I’ve quoted devastating statistics, written op-eds, told first-person accounts. The bottom line is this: Where you stand tonight matters. You can either normalize the existence of LGBTQ individuals, or you can become part of the very stigma that threatens the lives of some of the most vulnerable and valuable children in your community.’”

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## AUTHOR STATEMENT

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From an interview with Robie H. Harris published in *You Can't Say That!* edited by Leonard S. Marcus

On March 9, 1997, a journalist named Michael Sokolove wrote about *It's Perfectly Normal* in an article published in Philadelphia's *Inquirer Magazine*. The article was titled "Sex and the Censors." As part of his research, he asked to accompany me on a school visit in New York City. I said that I couldn't give him permission to do that because a reporter's presence might make the kids feel less comfortable about sharing their ideas or asking questions. Instead I invited him to come to see me at my office and offered to arrange for him to talk with some of the experts with whom I consulted. To all of this he happily agreed. On the Thursday before publication of his article, I received an advance copy of the finished piece, and my heart sank when I came to the story of a court case involving child sexual abuse in which *It's Perfectly Normal* had played a part.

A ten-year-old girl in Wilmington, Delaware, had gone to the library with her mother, who told the girl that she could take out any book she wanted. She picked a copy of *It's Perfectly Normal*, which was out on open shelves. She took the book home and started to read it, turning straight to the chapter on sexual abuse. Then she went to her mother and, holding the book open to that section, said, "This is me." Her father was the abuser, and the girl had never talked to her mother about it before. In the trial that followed, the story of the girl and the book was told. After the father was convicted and given a sixty- two- year sentence, the judge commented, "There were heroes in this case. One was the child, and the other was the book." I later wrote the judge to say that I respectfully disagreed. Yes, there were heroes: the child, of course, but also her mother, who had established a strong enough bond of trust with her that her daughter could feel free finally to tell her what was happening. Another hero was the librarian, who had made *It's Perfectly Normal* so easy for a child to find. Because of these heroes, the abuse was at last stopped.

I have been called a pornographer, a child abuser—every name in the book, as the saying goes. But whenever I am called one of those names, I think of that ten-year-old girl. I wish we never had to talk with kids about any of these aberrant behaviors. But we have to do so because they already know about them to some extent and because kids have a right to have the accurate information that can keep them healthy and safe. They need to know how to get help to make any abusive behavior stop.

### A note from Robie H. Harris in the 2021 edition

Since *It's Perfectly Normal* was first published, Michael Emberley and I have never stopped talking with kids, preteens, teens, and adults about the information and issues in this book. It has given us the opportunity and privilege to learn even more about what young people need to know to stay healthy. We have consulted with experts, including parents, teachers, librarians, doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychoanalysts, scientists, clergy, preteens, and teens, regarding what information about puberty, sex, gender, reproduction, and many other topics needed to be updated or added. Whenever changes in the text and art are necessary to make this book as up-to-date and accurate as possible, we make them.

Comprehensive, truthful, and accessible, this newest edition of *It's Perfectly Normal* provides young people with up-to-date facts about the physical and emotional changes in puberty, including the feelings they may have about relationships and identities. Preteens and teens need this latest information in order to make responsible decisions and stay healthy.

We hope that this new edition will help to keep the next generation of kids, preteens, and teens healthy and safe. We also hope it will help them make informed and responsible decisions about sexual health as they continue to grow up and go through puberty and adolescence.

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## **\*A NOTE ON AGE RANGES**

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A publisher-suggested age range covers the gamut of readers that publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate age range for the diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book's intended use.

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