

SEX EDUCATION - THE TIME IS NOW

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BY

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SEX.....a three letter word that probably gets more attention than any other word in the English vocabulary, and yet it is a subject that is one of the most misunderstood. Although it is both a powerful and popular topic, it is frequently dismissed as explosive or controversial where school health curriculum is concerned. In years past, school systems made up of school boards, administrators and teachers have completely or partially side-stepped this hotly debated issue. Some systems have had a short one hour lecture on human reproduction and anatomy, while other schools have done nothing at all. Our local schools include it as a short unit on human reproduction in the Freshman Health classes. It is covered in more depth in an elective course called "Family Living" within the Home Economics Department. Regardless of the school's curriculum or lack of one, young people still talk about sex. They have questions which demand answers. If adults do not provide accurate, factual information, they will get it somewhere else.

Sex is on display everywhere; art, books, music, films, plays, T.V. and comedy. At every turn the public is bombarded, with the young adult being the main target. Sex sells everything from automobiles to toothpaste. It has been estimated that the average student, in his or her early teens spends as much time with the mass media as they do in school. The Center for Population Options estimates that the average television viewer sees more than 9000 scenes of suggested sexual intercourse, sexual comment, or innuendo in a year. Yet reference to birth control or even to the consequences of

sexual activity are rare. Eighteen months ago when the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists unveiled a new public service announcement designed to combat teenage pregnancy, all three major networks balked. The reason: the announcement included the word contraceptives. These are the same networks that, as one ABC official put it, "routinely depict intercourse to the point of physical motion under the covers of a bed." Network officials have since relented, but the offending word has been dropped. In our modern society, sex is almost exclusively body oriented with little rational or intellectual thought included.

Our culture is one that throws young couples together at an early age, expecting them to act like adults while being treated like children. Many parents feel that their children are too young to be told the "facts of life." In many instances, when parents finally wake up and see their children as a physically mature human with sexual desires, it is too late. However, many parents are too uncomfortable with the subject or too ignorant of the facts concerning human sexuality to discuss it openly with their children.

Whether adult society likes it or not, American adolescents are far more sexually active than they used to be. Statistics show that the incidence of sexual intercourse among unmarried teenage women increased by two-thirds during the 1970's. A report in The American Journal for Public Health shows that 20% of American teenagers are sexually active by the time they are sixteen and that this number jumps to 50% at the age of eighteen.

The sexual revolution seems to have gone from the college campus, to the high school, and now into the junior high and elementary

schools. "In the eyes of their peers, it is important for kids to be sexually active. No one wants to be a virgin," observes Amy Williams, Director Of San Francisco's Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Project. She feels that the social and peer pressure even on the youngest adolescents can be overwhelming.

Social workers are almost unanimous in citing the influence of popular media in escalating the national trend toward precocious sexuality. Yet, with all their early experimentation and their obsession with sex in rock music and on M.T.V., one thing about American teenagers has not changed; they are in many ways just as ignorant about the scientific facts about reproduction as those before them. Teenage idols and faces change, from Doris Day to Madonna, but misinformation remains. Thus, many young people grow up with false notions and myths about sexuality. Their education was less than adequate, and those who suffer from unwanted pregnancies, diseases, and unhappy relationships have fallen victims. They were uninformed from their parents and other adults, and forced to seek information as best they could.

Studies dealing with a student's level of knowledge on human sexuality indicate, in most instances, it is a case of "the blind leading the blind." Information is passed among peers causing many young people to live with distorted and misconstrued ideas. Old beliefs, such as a Coca Cola douche can prevent pregnancy, you can't get pregnant the first time or the first three times you have sex, or that you can't get pregnant standing up are still around today. Other misconceptions about contraception include drinking a bottle of hot sauce after having sex or wearing high heels during intercourse as

means of preventing pregnancy.

In many instances, teenagers will not go to their parents asking for information. In one survey, it was found that only one-tenth of students talk to their parents about sex. Although, when outside sex education was introduced either through the school or a community agency, an increase in the level of sex communication among family members was reported.

Interestingly, fifteen year olds who receive no sex education and do not talk to their parents about sex are the most sexually active at about 31%. Talking to their parents about sex lowers the number of sexually active teens to 21%. Those who receive sex education classes but do not talk to their parents about it are 17% active. As would be expected, those who receive sex education classes and talk to their parents about sexual matters are the least active at only 15%.

As opponents and proponents take their stands on this controversial issue there are many startling facts which cannot be denied.

- 1) The average teen becomes sexually active at age 16.
- 2) It takes the average teenage girl nine months to seek out a means of birth control after she becomes sexually active.
- 3) Less than one-third of sexually active teens report using contraceptives consistently.
- 4) Venereal disease is the number one communicable disease.
- 5) 80% of those who give birth before age 17 do not complete high school.
- 6) A teen mother is twice as likely to be poor as a non-teen mother.

- 7) One of every four black babies are born to unwed mothers.
- 8) 71% of all Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients had their first child as a teen.
- 9) Teenage mothers are 20% more likely to have low birth weight babies than mothers over the age of 20.
- 10) U.S. teenage pregnancy rate is twice as high as that of the next industrialized nation, while the U.S. rates third in the percentage of teens who are sexually active.

These cold hard facts cannot and must not be swept under the rug. Concerned adults must recognize these problems and plot a course of action. But what is the best course? If most parents are not comfortable with or lack information on the subject of sex, what is the next institution in charge? One might assume, it would be the church. Although there are a few such programs involving sex education, they are very scarce, and it would seem that the mass teenage population cannot be reached through the church. This leaves us with the school being the best recourse.

One problem involving school sex education, is the confusion as to just what is sex education and what should it be called. Across the country, sex education courses are identified by a number of names, "Human Sexuality", "Family Health", "Life Education", "Personal Ethics", or "Family Living." Should it be just biological and anatomical information or should emphasis be placed on interpersonal relationships? In the words of an American School Health Association Committee, "Sex Education should consist of instruction to develop an understanding of the physical, mental, emotional, social, economic, and psychological phases of human relations as they are affected by

male and female relationships. It....emphasizes attitude, development, and guidance related to the association between the sexes. It implies that man's sexuality is integrated into his total life development as a health entity and source of creative energy."

It is quite obvious that sex education is a multidimensional topic and should be handled in such a manner. Although such an opinion presents extra complications. Can the school realistically teach morals and ethical values? Some would ask, "At what point is education over-stepping its boundaries?"

One can easily see, that those curriculums which only teach basic anatomy and reproduction are safer and much less controversial, than those that go into deeper boy/girl behavior. But is easier necessarily better? To be effective, somehow the school system must integrate both the physical and ethical aspects of sex education. Some school curriculums have been expanded to include a broader set of "the three R's", that being respect for others, reverence for life , and responsibility for one's own actions.

The younger generation must be challenged to explore its own feelings regarding sex. Teenagers should be reminded of the culture in which they are a part, and the influences of their church and parents. After all of the facts and viewpoints have been examined, only then can logical decisions be made.

Another issue regarding sex education is where should it be included in the curriculum.

- 1) A separate course.
- 2) An integrated approach.
- 3) A part of health education.

For the already overcrowded curriculum, the separate course presents the difficulty of moving other subjects around so that adequate time can be given to the subject. Although this provides a certain in-depth concentration, it does tend to isolate such a major topic.

Another school of thought is that it should be an integrated study. It might be possible to include sex education with other subjects such as History or English. Although great lessons are to be learned from past experiences and concepts regarding sex, this approach would take very careful planning by all teachers.

Placing sex education in the health courses at all levels of our schools seems most practical. The numerous sex misconceptions held by youth have an immediate and far-reaching effect on their total health. By including it as such, greater impact can be made.

A good sex education curriculum is of no use without a good teacher. Many are concerned about the qualifications of the instructor. Will he or she have special preparation? Will there be a special in-service opportunity to pursue the topic in detail? What is the teacher's attitude? A reluctance on the part of some teachers might be expected. They may hesitate because of their own insecurities, of their own lack of knowledge, or perhaps their own unwillingness to get involved in the controversy.

Ideally, the teacher should be a sex specialist of advanced training in dealing with sex and human awareness, but it is not likely that most schools can afford such a professional. Therefore, schools should look for special adults able to educate and relate to adolescents through warmth, sincerity and compassion.

How does America compare with other countries in sex education? We are far less advanced. Americans generally approach sex information with less openness than their fellow developed nations. In Sweden, teenagers are sexually active even earlier than their U.S. counterparts; however, the Swedish National Board of Education has provided very early curriculum guidelines. At age seven, every child in the country receives thorough instruction in reproductive biology and by age ten has been introduced to the various types of contraceptives. The Swedish Board's specialist in sex education says, "Teachers are expected to deal with the subject whenever it becomes relevant, irrespective of the subject they are teaching. The idea is to dedramatize and demystify sex so that the familiarity will make the child less likely to fall prey to unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease."

In Holland, sex is similarly demystified. Teens can obtain contraceptive counseling at government clinics for a minimal fee. In addition, the Dutch media has played an important role in educating the public with frequent broadcasts on birth control, abortion, and related issues. When comparing statistics among the United States, Canada, England, France, Netherlands, and Sweden, we find that the pregnancy rate for the U.S. is twice as high.

Faye Wattleton, president of the New York based Planned Parenthood Federation explains, "We are still very much governed by our puritanical heritage. While European societies have chosen to recognize sexual development as a normal part of human development, we have chosen to repress it. At the same time, we behave as if we're not repressing it." In studying various cultures, researchers have

found that the highest teen-pregnancy rates were in countries with the least open attitudes toward sex.

The Reagan Administration has taken steps to make it difficult for teenagers to obtain contraceptives. Since taking office, the President has repeatedly tried to restrict the availability of family planning services. In 1983, the Administration attempted to control teenage access to birth control by issuing what quickly became known as the "squeal rule". The regulation required federally funded clinics to notify parents within ten days of prescribing contraceptives to minors. However, the regulation was stopped by the courts on the grounds that it would have increased unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

In addition, to President Reagan's goal to limit teenage contraceptives, he has gone one step further by cutting appropriations for the Feeding Program for Women, Infants and Children. This program offers nutritional supplements and medical care for low-income expectant mothers. The cuts, say critics, will prove to be expensive in the long run because caring for low-birth weight infants through Medicare is many times more costly than preventive prenatal measures.

In 1981, the Reagan Administration instituted a program to in its words, "encourage teenagers not to engage in sexual activities." In the same year, Phyllis Schlafly, a leading right-to-lifer stated, "sex education classes are simply sales meetings for abortion clinics." She contends that "sex education is up to the parents, not the state. Teaching children about birth control is equal to condoning promiscuity." She claims there is "simply no way to tell youngsters about contraception without implicitly telling them that sex is O.K.,

and that you have put your Good Housekeeping seal on it."

And yet, even with such negative input from national groups, support for sex education is very strong. Sex education has been approved by a large number of national organizations, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, American School Health Association, American Public Health Association, National Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA), and the National Council of Churches. It is interesting to note a recent Harris Poll showed 85% of those polled support the idea of sex education in the schools. In another survey 78% of Americans responded "YES" to the question, "Do you favor sex education in the schools, including information about birth control?" Once again, in American society, it seems that the majority sits idle and does nothing to shape national policy in the right direction.

Positive steps have been taken in our own community to address some of these problems. The recent Forum on Teenage Pregnancy and the subsequent Town Meeting are laying the groundwork and allowing public input for a sex education program in our local public schools.

On the state level the Kentucky House Education Committee has approved a bill to require statewide sex education. One of the committee members said, "We must have the courage to teach that sex is not for children." Representative Tom Burch of Louisville, who sponsored the bill, stated in testimony before the committee, "We've got to educate our population. It's not something that you 'just say no' to. Twelve year old girls ought to be enjoying life, not having kids, but it is not being taught at home. So, it's got to be taught in our schools."

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to note the goal of a 1984 report prepared by Douglas Kirby, with the Center for Health Promotion and Education at the Center for Disease Control. He states, "It is the goal of sexuality educators to reduce unwanted, irresponsible, or self-destructive sexual activity; to reduce unprotected intercourse, unintended pregnancies, and to reduce sexually transmitted diseases." He notes that it may be difficult to implement such across the board programs during a conservative political era, but efforts must still be made.

No doubt, sex among teenagers will not go away. Closing our eyes, and burying our heads in the sand will not make the facts disappear. The problem of little or no formal sex education has contributed to the epidemic levels of teenage promiscuity, venereal disease, and unwanted pregnancy. As adults, we must accept some of the responsibility and commit ourselves to work, each in our own way and then collectively to solve these problems. We must all accept Victor Hugos's challenge, "If a soul is left in the darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin; but he who creates the darkness."