

## EDUCATING FOR CHARACTER IN THE SEXUAL DOMAIN

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In his famous “Marshmallow Test,” Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel offered 4-year-old children a deal: If they could delay eating a nice, fresh marshmallow until he returned from a 15-minute errand, he would give them two marshmallows. But if they ate the marshmallow before he returned, that would be the only one they would get.

What would you do if you were four? Different 4-year-olds did different things. Some devoured the marshmallow in a matter of seconds. But others managed to wait the full 15 minutes and earn the second marshmallow. A hidden camera captured their various self-control strategies: some covered their eyes, some tried to go to sleep, others played games with their hands, and some talked or sang to themselves. Mischel’s marshmallow study subsequently followed its subjects into their senior year of high school and compared the “grabbers” with the “waiters.” Those who could delay gratification at age four were, as teenagers:

- still better able to delay gratification in pursuit of goals
- better able to make plans and follow through on them
- more likely to persevere in the face of difficulty
- more self-reliant and dependable
- better able to cope with stress
- better able to concentrate on a task
- more academically competent—scoring, on average, more than 100 points higher on a college entrance exam than the children who did not delay gratification on the marshmallow test at age four.<sup>1</sup>

Mischel concluded: The ability to regulate an impulse in the pursuit of a goal is a “meta-ability” that affects the development of many other important capacities.

### Self-Discipline and Quality of Life

Through history, self-discipline—the control of our impulses, appetites, and passions—has been considered a mark of good character. In his book *The Moral Sense*, political scientist James Q. Wilson notes that Aristotle ranked temperance, along with justice and courage, as qualities of character that are always and everywhere required of anyone we would call good.<sup>2</sup> Wilson comments:

It is a remarkable characteristic of human society that most of the things that are best for us—that is, most likely to produce genuine and enduring happiness—require us to forgo some immediate pleasure. Success at an occupation requires study now; success at music requires practice now; success at romantic love requires courtship now; a reputation for honesty requires forgoing temptations now; the respect and affection of our grown children requires long hours and much effort devoted to their young years.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual self-discipline presents special challenges. In his book, *The Courage To Be Chaste*, the Franciscan priest-psychologist Benedict Groeschel observes, “Sexual self-control is often the weakest link in an individual’s self-control system.” There are good reasons why lust is considered one of the seven deadly sins. Thomas Aquinas said that unchastity has “eight daughters: blindness of mind, rashness, thoughtlessness, instability, inordinate self-love, excessive love of the world, rejection of God, and despair.” The philosopher Joseph Pieper said, “Surrender to sensuality paralyzes the powers of the moral person.”

Wisdom about sexual restraint, however, was swept aside by the sexual revolution, still making its way around the world. The sexual revolution advanced a radical idea: that people should be free to have sex without the strictures of marriage, without commitment, and even without love. This new sexual ideology was joined and fueled by a new contraceptive technology, the birth control pill, which severed the link between sex and procreation. You could have sex without worrying about pregnancy, the quality of your relationship, or the character of your partner.

The new sexual freedom promised greater happiness, but it is now painfully clear that we suffer from a plague of problems stemming from the breakdown of sexual morality: the sexualizing of popular culture; ever more precocious sexual activity on the part of the young; teen pregnancies; unwed births; father absence, which is the strongest predictor of nearly every childhood pathology; abortions; an explosion of STDs (15 million new cases every year in the U.S.); a cluster of emotional and behavioral problems associated with uncommitted sex, including higher rates of depression and suicide among sexually active youth (in the U.S., 12- to 16-year-old girls who are not virgins are six times more likely to attempt to take their lives); sexual harassment and other forms of sexual acting out in our schools; a tidal wave of pornography, arguably the addiction of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the sexual abuse of children; serial cohabitation as a norm for unmarried adults; the heightened risk of divorce associated with premarital cohabitation; rising levels of marital infidelity; and the weakening of marriage and the family caused by all of these problems. Surveying this moral landscape, the essayist William Schickel observes, “Chastity, like honesty, is a civic as well as a personal virtue. When a society loses chastity, it begins to destroy itself.”<sup>4</sup>

No consequence of the sexual revolution has been more insidious than the sexualizing of children. A few years ago, the syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker reported the following example:

At a skating rink in a southern city, a father stopped to pick up his 11-year-old daughter. In the center of the darkened rink were 40 or 50 children, all about his daughter’s age or

younger, forming a circle. As the father drew closer, he could see that in the center of the circle were several boys and girls acting out positions of simulated sex. Several boys made sandwiches of little girls. One boy stood behind a girl, his arms around her and his hands on her genital area. The surrounding circle of kids watched in fascination. The father says that when they saw him approaching, a few straggled away but most showed no embarrassment. When he reported all this to the rink manager, he said that no one else had complained, that “dirty dancing” was not allowed in his rink, and that in the future he would increase the lighting. Then he added, “But it’s a different world.”<sup>5</sup>

So that’s the bad news. Our children are growing up in a garbage culture. The media and marketplace culture grow steadily worse.

But there is hope on the horizon. Chastity may be making a comeback. In the United States, high school students who say they have not had sexual intercourse are in the majority for the first time in 25 years. There are fresh new voices speaking up for sexual sanity. Wendy Shalit, author of *The Return to Modesty*<sup>6</sup> and the new book, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It’s Not Bad To Be Good*, writes with wit and wisdom about why modesty makes your life more interesting. New York *Daily News* columnist Dawn Eden, a thirty-something former rock music historian and salty blogger (“The Dawn Patrol”), has just published *The Thrill of the Chaste: Finding Fulfillment While Keeping Your Clothes On*.<sup>7</sup> A convert to Catholicism who until a few years ago lived the “Sex in the City” lifestyle, Eden now speaks to college students about avoiding the destructive effects of the “hook-up” sexual culture and why chastity prepares you for authentic love.

In a world still in the grip of sexual hedonism but beginning, at least in some quarters, to search for a better way, how can we foster chastity and the many other virtues that make up good character?

### **Educating for Character in the Sexual Domain: Three Essential Assets**

Because sex has profound personal and societal consequences, ethical sexuality—disciplining one’s sexual desires and acting with respect for self and others—must be considered an essential part of good character.<sup>8</sup> Because we need good character to guide our sexual lives, sexuality education must be character education, making the development of good character a central goal.

What assets do young people need to be able to draw upon in order to live a chaste life style in our current culture? I think there are three: The first two are internal assets, characteristics of the person; the third asset consists of features of the social environment.

1. **ethical wisdom** about what is right and good and, in particular, why chastity is necessary for self-respect and authentic happiness.

2. **strengths of character** that make it possible to live a chaste life style—virtues such as self-control in the face of sexual temptation; the self-respect that motivates modesty; a deep respect for the rights, dignity, and value of other human beings; a sense of responsibility for others' welfare; the fortitude to resist sexual pressures; the integrity that keeps us faithful to our beliefs and values; the determination to start over if you've made mistakes; and, if one has religious faith, the humility to rely on God's grace in the face of struggles and failures.
3. **ethical support systems**—such as family, friends, school, and one's faith community—that help an individual develop and then sustain the commitment to chastity. Clear teaching and good example from our parents; a school-based, character-centered course in marriage and family preparation; a schoolwide culture of character; and solid teaching about chastity in our churches, temples, and mosques are examples of ethical support systems that, working together, can maximize the support a young person needs to live chastely in a world that does not value this virtue.

Let's examine each of these three essential assets and what we can do to develop them.

## Ethical Wisdom

The ancient Greeks considered prudence, or practical wisdom, to be the master virtue because it directs all the others. Wisdom tells us how to put virtues such as love and courage and integrity into practice. Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see the truth. As the ethicist Richard Gula points out, "We cannot do right unless we first see correctly." For that reason, ethical wisdom is the foundation of a chaste life. Lest we underestimate the importance of clear moral thinking about sex, consider the statement of a college senior. She says, "I failed at chastity because I couldn't answer the question, 'Why *shouldn't* I have sex?' I gave in because I figured that since I didn't have a solid answer, I must be wrong."

How can we help young people develop the solid ethical wisdom they will need to lead a chaste life? Here are a dozen things we can do.

**1. Teach the meaning of love.** A Canadian mother told me she was stunned and at a loss for words when her 16-year-old daughter Lisa disclosed that she and her 18-year-old boyfriend were thinking of having sex. When the mother said, "But, Lisa, sex is meant for love," the daughter replied, "But Mom, we *do* love each other, and this is how we want to express it." To help her daughter reflect on the meaning of true love, I suggested a line of reasoning that is well-expressed in a pamphlet titled *Love Waits*.

Love is patient; love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices, choices that could change your lives forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.<sup>9</sup>

**2. Teach the meaning of chastity.** Chastity is much more than not having sexual intercourse. As one speaker puts it, “You can refrain from sex and still be unchaste by looking at pornography, wearing skimpy clothes, or giving in to masturbation, passionate making-out, petting, or oral sex. Chastity is way of living, of honoring the gift of your sexuality.”<sup>10</sup> It's a lifestyle that embraces purity of mind, heart, and body. It's the strength of character that enables us to save all sexual intimacy for the committed love relationship of marriage. The logic of chastity is straightforward: Sexual intimacy belongs within marriage because marriage is the only relationship in which a man and a woman can give themselves to each other totally and can responsibly conceive and raise a child.

**3. Help young people develop a vision of marriage and a future orientation.** Says one veteran abstinence educator: “Kids won't be motivated to wait unless they know what they're waiting *for*. Once they start thinking about marriage as a personal life goal and begin to think about what they would like to bring to their marriage, they have a real reason to save sexual intimacy for the special person they want to spend their life with.”

For this reason, ethical wisdom in the service of chastity must include a vision of the relationship in which sex is beautiful and good and a source of genuine happiness. Here is one way to articulate that vision:

Sex is most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it's part of something bigger—a continuing, loving, truly committed relationship. When you're married, your sexual intimacy expresses your total commitment to each other. You're saying with your body, “I give myself to you, completely.” Not being totally committed changes the meaning of the sex act. Then it's not part of the complete giving of yourself. Even if you're engaged, you can always get disengaged. Half of the couples who are engaged have been engaged before.

From this perspective, you join your bodies when you join your lives. The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.

Having a vision of marriage fosters a “future orientation”—making decisions with the future in mind. Jason Evert, author of the pamphlet *Pure Manhood*,<sup>11</sup> challenges guys to “treat girls the way you would want another guy to treat your future bride.” If you wouldn't want some other guy to engage in such-and-such sexual behavior with your future bride, then should

*you* be doing that with your current girlfriend? She may very well become someone else's bride some day, so treat her with respect and reverence.

When Jason Evert was engaged to Crystalina Padilla, we invited them both to speak at our Center's annual character education conference on the topic, "What If We Really Love Each Other?" When Crystalina took the stage, she gave a compelling personal testimony:

I lost my virginity when I was 15. My boyfriend and I thought we loved each other. But once we began having sex, it completely destroyed any love we had. I felt he was no longer interested in spending time with me—he was interested in spending time with my body.

Eventually disillusioned by this relationship and the whole party scene, Crystalina resolved to wait for the guy she would marry. She kept her hopes and dreams for the future uppermost in her mind, so they guided all her decisions of the moment.

Every time a guy hit on me and I said no, I wrote a letter to my future husband telling him I had done that, and I was waiting for him. I'm going to give Jason those letters on our wedding night. He accepts the mistakes I've made in the past. He loves me for the person I have become.

Crystalina's story teaches another life lesson, vitally important for young persons who may have already been sexually involved: If you've made a mistake, you can start over. You can't change the past, but you can choose the future. Believing that is part of what it means to have a future orientation.

**4. Teach the rewards of waiting.** Ethical wisdom means understanding that waiting for marriage carries many rewards—immediate rewards as well as future ones. Here are ten:

1. Waiting for marriage to have sex will make your dating relationships better because you'll spend more time getting to know each other.
2. Waiting will increase your self-respect.
3. Waiting will gain you respect for having the courage of your convictions.
4. Waiting teaches you to respect others—you won't tempt or pressure them.
5. Waiting takes the pressure off you.
6. Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no regrets).
7. Waiting will help you find the right mate—someone who values you for the person you are.
8. Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage—free of comparisons and based on trust. By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.

9. By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as faithfulness, good judgment, self-control, modesty, and genuine respect for self and others—you’re developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner.
10. By becoming a person of character yourself, you’ll be able to attract a person of character—the kind of person you’d like to marry and to have as the father or mother of your children.<sup>12</sup>

**5. Teach the emotional dangers of premarital sex.** Ethical wisdom also means understanding the dangers of being sexually intimate outside the committed love relationship of marriage. In discussions of sex, much is said about the dangers of pregnancy and disease—certainly important to make clear—but much less about the emotional hazards. We want young people to understand that sex is about much more than the body. Our entire person—mind, body, heart, and soul—is involved. That’s why sexual intimacy can have powerful emotional consequences.

Dr. Armand Nicholi, Jr., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes a study carried out at Harvard in the 1960s that shed light on the emotional consequences of casual sex:

Not long after the sexual revolution was underway, clinicians—even orthodox Freudians—observed that the new sexual freedom was creating a psychological disaster. We began to study Harvard students who complained of emptiness and despondency.

There was a gap between their social conscience and the morality of their personal lives. The new sexual permissiveness was leading to empty relationships and feelings of self-contempt. Many of these students were preoccupied with the passing of time and with death. They yearned for meaning, for a moral framework. When some of them moved away from moral relativism to a system of clear values—typically embracing a drug-free lifestyle and strict sexual code—they reported that their relationships with the opposite sex improved, as did their relations with peers in general, their relationship with their parents, and their academic performance.<sup>13</sup>

In our Center’s fall, 2007 newsletter, *The Fourth and Fifth Rs*, we share stories from the lives of high school and college students that illustrate ten emotional dangers of premarital sexual involvement: (1) worry about pregnancy and disease, (2) regret, (3) guilt; (4) loss of self-esteem and self-respect; (5) the corruption of character; (6) fear of commitment, (7) depression and suicide (a significantly greater risk for sexually active teens<sup>14</sup>), (8) damaged or ruined relationships, (9) stunted personal development, and (10) negative effects on marriage. We suggest that teachers, after having students read these stories, pose questions for writing and discussion: (1) Why does sexual involvement have emotional consequences?; (2) Are these emotional consequences different for men and women? If so, why?, and (3) In what kind of relationship is sex most emotionally safe and fulfilling? Why?

**6. Develop the ethical reasoning needed to answer the question, “What if I use protection—doesn’t that make sex responsible?”** Young people will have heard it said, “Abstain as long as you can, but if you do have sex, be responsible and protect yourself and your partner.” Can our students identify the ethical fallacies in this kind of thinking? Does using a condom really make unmarried sex a “responsible” act? To help students develop the moral reasoning that sees the fallacies of “safe sex” thinking, a teacher can use Socratic questioning:

*Does premarital sex carry any risks for self and others?*

Yes.

*What are those risks?*

Pregnancy; more than 20 STDs; the possibility of future infertility due to an STD; and emotional consequences such as regret, guilt, lowered self-esteem, depression, and negative effects on marriage.

*Are these serious risks?*

Yes.

*Do condoms eliminate these risks?*

No. They provide less than complete protection against pregnancy (15% failure rate), HIV/AIDS (15% failure rate); Chlamydia, a significant cause of female infertility (50% failure rate); and human papillomavirus, the cause of cervical cancer (only “some risk reduction”). Condoms obviously provide zero protection against emotional consequences; there is no condom for the heart.

*Is it ever morally responsible to take serious, unnecessary risks with your own or someone else’s health, life, and emotional welfare?*

Clearly, it’s not.

**7. Examine the consequences of cohabiting.** Cohabitation is a growing pattern among young adults. In the U.S., it has increased eleven-fold since 1960. Many young people say they live together in order to find out whether they are “sexually compatible.” We should explain to them that part of the thrill of beginning a married life together is learning about sex together, discovering how to make each other happy, just as you do in other areas of your relationship. We should also acquaint them with what the research shows about cohabitation. Here are seven facts that should be part of every young person’s ethical awareness<sup>15</sup>:

1. Cohabiting relationships are unstable. Nine of 10 cohabiting relationships break up in less than five years.



2. The rate of divorce among those who cohabit before marrying is nearly double that of couples who marry without having lived together.
3. Men in cohabiting relationships are four times more likely to be unfaithful than husbands.
4. The rate of STDs for cohabiting women is six times higher than for married women.
5. Women in cohabiting relationships end up contributing more than 70% of the relationship's income. The poverty rate for children of cohabiting couples is five times greater than for children of married couples.
6. Depression is three times more likely in cohabiting couples. Marriages preceded by cohabiting are more prone to drug and alcohol problems.
7. Child abuse is 20 times higher in families where the couple has had children without being married.

One scholar summarizes the research on cohabitation: "Cohabitation is bad for men, worse for women, and horrible for children."<sup>16</sup>

**8. Address the question, *How far is too far?*** Discussions of sex often focus on why not to have intercourse but don't give clear guidelines concerning how far you should go if you don't go all the way. A high school counselor offers this advice: "If you don't want to drive over a cliff, don't pull up to the edge and race the engine." George Eager, in his book *Sex, Love, and Dating*, says you're going too far when:

- either a guy's or a girl's hands start roaming
- either of you starts to remove clothing
- you are doing something you would not be doing around someone you really respect
- you are arousing feelings that undermine your ability to make a good decision.

A practical guideline we can teach our children: Limit premarital physical affection to brief hugs and light kisses, and do it to express affection, not to seek arousal. Saving sex for marriage means saving *all* of it for marriage because all forms of sexual intimacy and passion are "the language of marriage."<sup>17</sup>

**9. Teach media literacy.** Especially in today's media-driven culture, ethical wisdom must include media literacy—the ability to think critically about all forms of media. There are many good media literacy websites (e.g., [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)) that parents and teachers can take advantage of. As part of chastity education, media literacy should teach students to ask questions such as, "Do TV and movies portray sex realistically—the way it is in real life? Make

a list of the consequences that are rarely, if ever, portrayed.” Sex on the screen almost never depicts consequences such as unmarried pregnancy, single-parent poverty, abortion and its aftermath, STDs, infertility, or emotional and spiritual repercussions of sex outside marriage.

Media literacy must also seek to fortify our young against pornography. With the rise of the Internet, you don’t have to seek pornography out; it comes to you. Ethical wisdom isn’t all young people need to resist this temptation, but clear thinking will help. Why is pornography wrong? We can explain:

Pornography debases sex. It takes something beautiful and makes it dirty. It violates the dignity of the human person and the dignity of the human body. It puts images into your mind that you may never be able to get rid of. It’s also addictive; it triggers powerful chemical reactions in your brain, just the way a drug does. Like other addictions, pornography brings short-term pleasure but then starts to run your life. It will lower your self-respect.

For males, the habit of pornography will usually lead to the habit of masturbation, which will further lower your self-respect and which, from a religious perspective, is an abuse of God’s gift of sex. Finally, if you get hooked on porn as a teenager, chances are you’ll carry that habit into your marriage, where it can cause serious problems. Women whose husbands are involved with pornography feel like the victims of a spiritual adultery.

As always, stories will help. Here is Wes’s story, from Sean Covey’s new book, *The Six Most Important Decisions You’ll Ever Make* (which includes an excellent chapter on dating and sex):

Pornography is very, very addicting. I was hooked the moment I saw it—it was all I ever thought about. I shut out my family to be with the porn. I stashed it in the closet and then I’d do some homework, then look at porn some more until dinner. After dinner, I’d watch movies with sex and nudity on cable till 3:00 am. I’d fall asleep, wake up at 6 am, look at some more, go to school, and do it all over again. I was trapped and digging deeper and deeper and didn’t know how to get out. That’s the power porn has. My advice is to stay as far away from pornography as you can.<sup>18</sup>

We can also pose questions for writing and discussion that challenge students to think critically about pornography, such as:

1. In what ways does pornography negatively affect our self-respect?
2. How does it negatively affect our sexual attitudes and behavior?
3. What should parents do about pornography, especially Internet sites? If you were a parent, what rules would you establish in your home?
4. What could you say to someone who shows you pornography or downloads it in your presence if you wanted to convey that you don’t think it’s cool?

5. If you had a friend who was into pornography, what advice could you give him that might help him to break this habit? Who might he go to for help? How do people get free of other addictions—to drugs and alcohol, for example?

Chastity speaker Jason Evert says that he himself was into porn in high school and used girls because of it. On the radio show he now does for Catholic Answers, he got so many calls from men—husbands, fathers, people from all walks of life—who were struggling with pornography that he decided to make a series of CDs (available from Catholic Answers, [www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com)) on how to break free of this problem.

**10. Develop religious literacy.** The research report, “Religious Involvement and Children’s Well-Being,” finds that higher levels of religiosity in teens are linked to higher levels of altruistic attitudes and behaviors; lower levels of theft, vandalism, and violence; and lower levels of drug and alcohol use and sexual activity.<sup>19</sup> Religious *literacy*—knowing about religion—isn’t the same thing as *religiosity* (seriously practicing one’s faith), but religious literacy is important and should be part of every student’s store of ethical wisdom. We should first of all encourage students to find out what their own religious tradition, if they have one, teaches about sex. A lot of them don’t know. Even if we’re teaching in a secular school, we can encourage them to make use of all their intellectual and cultural resources, including their faith, when they make moral decisions about important life matters such as, “What is my obligation to the poor?” and “Should I have sex outside of marriage?”

In any educational context, secular or religious, it’s also appropriate to teach students what other major faith traditions teach about sex. Most young people are surprised to learn that the great world religions teach the same thing: Sex is the beautiful gift of a good God, but one reserved for husbands and wives in marriage. Here, for example, are the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam:

Rabbinic teaching, for at least 2,500 years, has consistently opposed premarital sex. Judaism enshrines sexual intercourse as a sanctified element in the most intimate and meaningful relationship between two human beings: the sacred marriage bond. —*Rabbi Isaac Frank*

The promise of two people to belong always to each other makes it possible for lovemaking to mean total giving and total receiving. It’s the totality of married life that makes sexual intercourse meaningful. That is why the Church refers to sexual intercourse as “the marital act.” —*Father Richard McCormick*

Islam views sexual love as a gift from God. It is a sign of God’s love and mercy. Islam limits sexual activity to men and women within the bond of marriage. —*Muzammil Siddiqi, Islamic teacher*

**11. Develop an understanding of universal moral principles.** All the forms of ethical wisdom I’ve discussed thus far have to do specifically with sex and reasons to be chaste. But these ethical insights are more likely to lead to ethical action if they build on a base of broader

ethical understandings that apply to the full range of moral behavior, not just to sex. For example, ethical wisdom also means helping students grasp the truth of a big idea: There is a “natural moral law” stamped into our human nature. Behaviors that are in harmony with this natural moral law are good and lead to happiness; behaviors that go against this moral law cause us problems. Sean Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, explains this idea in kid-friendly language:

We are all familiar with the effects of gravity. Throw a book up in the air and it comes down. That is a natural law or a principle. Just as there are principles that rule the physical world, there are principles that rule the human world. Principles aren't religious. They aren't American or Chinese. They aren't mine or yours. They aren't up for discussion. They apply equally to everybody: rich or poor, king or peasant, male or female. They can't be bought or sold. If you live by these principles, you will excel. If you break them, you will fail.

We can use our free will to go against these moral laws or principles—we can lie, cheat, steal, sleep around—but we can't escape the consequences of doing so. In the end, we always pay a price. What are some of these principles? Covey says that honesty is a principle. Respect is a principle. Hard work is a principle. Love is a principle. Moderation—not eating, drinking, or indulging in other legitimate pleasures to excess—is a principle.<sup>20</sup>

Consider, for example, the principle of respect. What happens when we treat other people disrespectfully? They lose respect for us. It damages our relationships. They may do something to get back at us. If we develop a pattern of treating other people disrespectfully, it will change the kind of person we are. We will find it hard to respect ourselves. We will find it difficult to be happy leading this kind of a life.

And so it is with sex. Unchaste actions, like all actions, have consequences. Look around: Which sexual choices lead to self-respect, loving relationships, and real happiness, and which do not?

**12. Teach the skills of ethical decision-making.** The capacity to think ethically about a wide range of life situations also includes the ability to use decision-making skills that help us apply general moral principles to particular situations. Granted, I should respect and care about other people, but what does that require me to do when someone tells me dirt about another kid at school? When I see another student cheating? When I see friends making sexual decisions that put them and others at risk?

Part of the ethical equipment young people need in order to make good decisions in the nitty-gritty of moral living is a series of “ethical tests”—questions they can ask themselves when faced with a moral decision. Here are eight such tests:

1. The Golden Rule Test: Would I want people to do this to me?

2. The Truth Test: Does this action represent the whole truth and nothing but the truth?
3. The What-If-Everybody-Did-This Test: Would I want everyone to do this (lie, cheat, steal, litter the school, etc.)? Would I want to live in that kind of world?
4. The Parents Test: How would my parents feel if they found out I did this? What advice would they give me if I asked them if I should do it?
5. The Religion Test: If I have religious beliefs, how do they apply to this action? What would a respected member of my religion advise? Are there any religious texts that I could draw on for guidance?
6. The Conscience Test: Does this go against my conscience? Will I feel guilty afterwards?
7. The Consequences Test: Might this action have bad consequences, such as damage to relationships or loss of self-respect, now or in the future? Might I come to regret doing this?
8. The Front Page Test: How would I feel if my action were reported on the front page of my hometown paper?

Young people won't, of course, apply all these tests to every moral decision they make. We certainly don't as adults. But even if they apply *one* of them, they'll make a better decision than if they acted on impulse.

These, then, are twelve facets of ethical wisdom that we should cultivate as the solid intellectual foundation of chaste life: an understanding of the meaning of love and the meaning of chastity; having a vision of marriage that creates a future orientation; understanding the rewards of waiting, the emotional dangers of premarital sex, why condoms don't make unmarried sex responsible, and the consequences of cohabitation; placing clear limits on physical affection; being critical consumers of media and aware of the special dangers of pornography; knowing what one's own and other religions teach about sex; understanding universal moral principles; and having the decision-making skills to apply them through ethical tests.

## **2. Strengths of character needed to live a chaste life**

Ethical wisdom creates a disposition to behave ethically, but in a great many cases, wisdom alone will not be enough to guarantee moral action, especially chaste actions. In the face of sexual temptations and pressures, we need a cluster of supporting virtues such as modesty, self-control, courage, and integrity. If we also believe, from a faith perspective, that God's help is needed to overcome our fallen nature, resist temptation, and strive for virtue, we would add to the list of chastity-supporting virtues, ones such as prayer, contrition for sin, and a humble reliance on God's mercy and love.

How can character education help young people develop good character? There are literally hundreds of ways that can be found in the literature of character education, which has grown dramatically over the past two decades. Websites such as those of the Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)), Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character ([www.bu.edu/education/caec](http://www.bu.edu/education/caec)), and our own Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs (Respect and Responsibility) ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)) are good places to begin to find books, articles, and other resources.

Not all character education methods and activities are of equal value, of course. For empirical evidence of effectiveness we can consult sources such as the report, *What Works in Character Education* (<http://www.characterandcitizenship.org/>) and the *Journal of Research in Character Education* (<http://www.infoagepub.com/products/journals/chared/>). Our Center recently carried out a two-year study of 24 award-winning high schools; the resulting 227-page report, *Smart & Good High Schools* ([www.cortland.edu/character/highschool](http://www.cortland.edu/character/highschool)), describes nearly a hundred promising practices linked to the research and the on-the-ground wisdom of practitioners, for developing what we call "eight strengths of character" (critical thinker, diligent and capable performer, socially and emotionally skilled person, ethical thinker, respectful and responsible moral agent, self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle, democratic citizen, and spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose).<sup>21</sup> We view these eight strengths as broad character assets and the target developmental outcomes of a school dedicated to helping students become both smart and good.

Let me focus here on just two general character development strategies from our *Smart & Good* report: "self-study" and "other-study." We think these strategies can be easily incorporated into any classroom, course, or other educational context. We believe these strategies maximize the effectiveness of character education by helping students take personal responsibility for developing their character. Self-study involves assessing our character strengths and weaknesses, then setting goals for improvement, and monitoring our progress. The rationale for self-study is that to ensure progressive growth in our character, we must first know ourselves.

Other-study involves the systematic study of other individuals or groups for what we can learn from them about character and its contribution to a good life. Other-study recognizes that we can gain a great deal from the example of others. Other-study therefore carefully analyzes the paths others have followed that have led to either success or problems.<sup>22</sup> Here are five character education activities that show how to use self-study, other-study, or both in combination.

**1. Have students formulate and pursue meaningful life goals.** The book *Cultivating Heart and Character* by Tony Devine and colleagues reports research indicating that cultures around the world affirm three life goals as sources of authentic happiness:

1. maturity of character—becoming the best person we can be

2. loving relationships, such as marriage, family, and close friendships.
3. contributing to society—making a positive difference in the lives of others.<sup>23</sup>

Looking at what other cultures value as important is one kind of other- study. It helps us step back from our own culture and examine our priorities. When we examine our own life, we are engaged in self-study.

Keeping in mind the three broad life goals that many cultures view as sources of authentic happiness, students can begin to set personal life goals. To help his students do this, Hal Urban, an award-winning high school history teacher, gave an assignment called "100 Goals":

#### 100 GOALS

1. Write at least 100 goals, more if you wish.
2. Divide them into categories. You can choose your own categories based on your interests. Here are some you might want to consider:
  - education
  - career
  - family
  - learning
  - service to others
  - fun/adventure
  - creating/making/building
  - self-improvement
  - things you'd like to own
  - reading
  - U.S. travel
  - foreign travel
  - personal improvement
  - spiritual growth
  - major accomplishments.
3. After you write the 100 goals, select the *10 that are the most important to you*. Write them in any order. Then write a paragraph on your #1 goal. Explain why it is so important to you.
4. This assignment will be a significant part of your second quarter grade.

Janelle Hernandez, one of Hal Urban's former students and now a pre-med student in college, says: "I still have my goals posted, and I look at them every day, just like Mr. Urban encouraged us to do. One of my goals was to run the hundred-meters hurdles in 18 seconds. At

first, I really didn't think I could do it, but I finally did make my goal." Teacher Urban comments: "I've had students write to me 10 or 15 years after graduation, sending me their list of 100 goals with the ones checked off that they've already achieved. They say, 'If you didn't make us do this assignment, I never would have even dreamed of most of these goals—let alone achieved them.'"

**2. Have students do a character self-inventory.** Another valuable form of self-study is to help students assess their own character strengths and areas for growth. Barbara Lewis's book, *What Do You Stand For?*, offers a character self-inventory, based on 29 virtues.<sup>24</sup> (See the "Assessment" tab on our Center's website for other surveys.) The instructions: "For each pair of statements, check the one that describes you. Or check *both* sentences if you believe that you already have a particular trait but would like to develop it further." Sample items:

1.     \_\_\_ I have positive attitudes.  
       \_\_\_ I'd like to have better attitudes.
2.     \_\_\_ I have clean habits and a clean mind.  
       \_\_\_ I'd like to have more positive habits, thoughts, and influences.
3.     \_\_\_ I have the courage to do and become what I want to be.  
       \_\_\_ I'd like to be more courageous.
4.     \_\_\_ I'm able to forgive others and myself.  
       \_\_\_ I want to learn how to forgive more easily.
5.     \_\_\_ I treat others with respect and courtesy.  
       \_\_\_ I need to be more respectful and courteous.
6.     \_\_\_ I'm responsible and hard-working.  
       \_\_\_ I want to develop my sense of responsibility and work ethic.

The text *Sex and Character* by Deborah Cole and Maureen Duran extends this kind of self-study to behaviors related to chastity. Students are invited to "examine your character and level of sexual maturity." Ten scale items are provided for each of six virtues: honesty, respect, courage, self-discipline, responsibility, and kindness. Here are sample items for just one of these virtues, self-discipline.



## A SEX AND CHARACTER SELF-INVENTORY

Self-Discipline (*Answer “always,” “sometimes,” or “never.”*)

1. If sexually aroused, do you pressure your date into having sex?
2. Can you turn down sex?
3. Do you avoid drinking on a date?
4. Do you look at pornographic material?
5. Are you willing to wait until marriage to have sex?<sup>25</sup>

Once students have done this kind of self-assessment, they are ready for the next step in self-study: setting goals in areas where they want to grow.

**3. Study persons of character.** We can motivate students to examine their own character and think about the sort of person they would like to become by exposing them to inspiring persons of character. This can take the form of reading a biographical sketch or full biography, listening to a story, hearing a guest lecture, or watching a good video or film about an historical or contemporary person of admirable character.

Opportunities for this kind of other-study abound. Somewhere in the evening paper or weekly newsmagazine there’s at least one story of integrity, compassion, or courage. (The examples of bad character—the latest sports scandal, corruption in high places, violations of human rights—are also valuable other-study opportunities.) The Giraffe Heroes Project ([www.giraffe.org](http://www.giraffe.org)) has developed a bank of more than 1,000 stories of everyday heroes of all ages who have shown compassion and courage by sticking out their necks for others. The website, [www.teachwithmovies.com](http://www.teachwithmovies.com), catalogues hundreds of good films that offer positive role models and strong character themes, such as “A Man for All Seasons” (integrity), “Gandhi” (the power of non-violence), “Chariots of Fire” (fidelity to principle), “Spitfire Grill” (sacrificial love), “Chronicles of Narnia” (loyalty and courage), and “Amazing Grace” (justice, faith, and perseverance). Onalee McGraw’s *Love and Life at the Movies: Educating for Character through the Film Classics* is a curriculum that uses films to examine the kind of character that makes for meaningful and lasting relationships.<sup>26</sup> And there are hundreds of fictional stories, from picture books to novels, whose admirable characters will live in a young person’s heart and imagination (see *Books That Build Character* by William Kilpatrick for an extensive annotated bibliography).

Models of chastity, especially peer models, are important other-studies to include. The story of Maria Goretti, beautifully told in Mary Reed Newland’s book, *The Saints and Our Children*<sup>27</sup> and recently made into a film (available, along with a study booklet, from [www.ignatius.com](http://www.ignatius.com)), shows a 12-year-old girl whose life of goodness and holiness prepared her to die rather than give in to the sexual assault of a neighbor boy. In August 2005, *Time* magazine published a special issue on “Being 13” that included a wonderful young role model of chastity: 13-year-old Armaan Rowther, a Pakistani-American boy who lives in Irvine, California. Here is what Armaan said:

I am continually faced by the same day-to-day challenges as any other boy my age. One thing that seems to set me the farthest apart is that my culture and religion do not accept the American concept of dating. Any teenager living in America knows how big an emphasis is placed on having boyfriends or girlfriends. At school it's the only thing kids seem to talk about. All my closest friends either have girlfriends or want to.

I'm asked why I don't date. I reply by explaining my personal view, which is that dating couples act in a way that only married couples should. The kind of relationship they share should exist only where there is a commitment, or else the relationship becomes meaningless. If or when I date, it will be in the pursuit of a companion with whom I can spend the rest of my life. Then the love that will exist in that marriage can be far more valued, appreciated, and respected by both partners.

Armaan's ability, at age 13, to grasp and articulate a vision of love and marriage might prompt us to raise our expectations for our own students. He continued, speaking about how it isn't easy to be different and how some of his Muslim friends urge him to just fit in:

At this stage of life, the last thing someone wants is to stand out as different. But blending in isn't easy in my case. In my religion, it's mandatory to pray five times a day. When I'm out with my friends playing sports or hanging out, I sometimes have to go aside and do my prayers. My friends know what I'm doing, but that doesn't make it less awkward.

I really stand out during the month of Ramadan, when I have to fast, not eating or drinking during daylight hours. It's not easy to practice your culture when you're surrounded by people who don't do the same as you do. This includes people who have the same culture as you but choose to ignore it and encourage you to ignore it, too. But I believe we must grasp and accept our differences because it is these differences that make each of us who we are.

Armaan is clearly high in a number of virtues: ethical wisdom, integrity, and courage, all undergirded by his religious faith. At the core of his integrity and courage is a strong sense of moral and religious identity, of who he is. He is also very respectful in how he explains himself to peers who ask why he thinks and acts differently. His testimony offers a fruitful opportunity for other-study and self-study. Questions for student writing and discussion could include:

1. What behaviors is Armaan most likely referring to when he says that American teenage couples "act in a way that only married couples should"? Why does he want to wait until marriage to have that kind of relationship?
2. What virtues, or strengths of character, enable him to hold firm to his beliefs about dating—and to observe his religion's prescriptions for prayer and fasting, even when some of his Muslim friends do not?
3. What is one strength of character he possesses that you admire and would like to develop to a higher degree in your own life? What is one specific thing you are willing to do to try to further develop that strength of character? Write out a plan for how you will achieve your goal.

Other-study and self study become more effective in bringing about a student's character growth if we add "public presentation" — sharing one's goal and progress toward that goal with at least one other person (the teacher, a parent, a classmate, a friend). The rationale for public presentation: We are more likely to act upon our good intentions when we are accountable to someone else.

**4. Have students set character development goals based on the virtues needed for a successful marriage.** Most young people have marriage as an important life goal. Marriage takes character. What character qualities make a good spouse? In small groups, students can brainstorm the qualities they think make a good husband or wife. Then they can listen to a guest presentation by a couple who have built a successful, lasting marriage. Based on their life experience, what do they think are the most important qualities in a marriage? Students can then do a self-study: "List 3 character virtues you feel you currently have that will make you a good marriage partner and three where you have room for improvement. Choose one to start working on this week. Make a plan, and share it with a classmate."

**5. Have students write a personal mission statement.** In one of the site visits in our *Smart & Good High Schools* study, we had an opportunity to watch a teacher work with her students to help them craft a mission statement. She set the stage by showing a clip from the Tom Cruise film, "Jerry McGuire," in which the hero takes the risk of writing a public mission statement pledging to care about other people. Then she gave students these directions:

#### WRITING YOUR MISSION STATEMENT

1. What kind of person do I want to be (with regard to character, not career)?
2. What do I want to do (with regard to contributions and achievements, not career)?
3. What unchanging values or principles will be the basis for my being and doing?
4. Imagine you are at your own funeral. What do you want people to be saying about you?
5. Make a list of "commandments" you believe in and will follow in your life. Incorporate these into your mission statement.

Next, she handed out three examples of mission statements, including one by a high school boy:

#### MY MISSION STATEMENT

- Have confidence in yourself and others.
- Be kind, courteous, and respectful to all people.
- Set reachable goals; never lose sight of them.
- Never take the simple things in life for granted.
- Appreciate other people's differences.

- Ask questions.
- Remember that before you can change someone else, you must first change yourself.
- Speak with your actions.
- Make time to help the less fortunate and those who are having a bad day.
- Read this mission statement every day.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, to set a high standard of excellence, the teacher read this statement: “A mission statement is not something you write overnight. It takes deep introspection, careful analysis, thoughtful expression, and often many rewrites to produce it in final form.”<sup>29</sup>

A senior girl testified to the difference that writing a mission statement made in her life:

During my junior year, I couldn’t concentrate on anything because I had a boyfriend. I wanted to do everything for him to make him happy. Then, naturally, the subject of sex came up. I wasn’t at all prepared for it, and it became a nagging, constant thing on my mind. I didn’t want to have sex—but everybody else kept saying, “Just do it.” Then I participated in a character development class at school where they taught me to write a mission statement. I started to write and kept on writing and writing. It gave me a direction and a focus, and I felt like I had a plan and a reason for doing what I was doing. It really helped me stick to my standards.<sup>30</sup>

### **3. Building Ethical Support Systems for Chastity**

The character development strategies of self-study, other-study, and publicly sharing one’s goals for self-improvement are ways to engage students in asking, “What sort of person do I want to become, and what do I need to do to become that kind of person?” Once young people are seriously engaged in the project of becoming the best persons they can be, they will make progress in the virtues. But still more is required if we wish, as character educators, to maximize support for living a life of character. We must create supportive moral environments, ones that help to offset the negative influences of a world that is hostile to chastity and many of the other virtues we want to foster. In our homes, schools, churches, youth groups, and other environments that we can influence, we must do everything we can to create a culture of character that supports good character and chaste living.

In our Smart & Good Schools vision, we call upon schools to take a leadership role in developing an “ethical learning community.” The ethical learning community provides a culture of character that challenges its members to do and be their best. To create this culture of character, the school must model and foster virtues through every phase of school life: the example of adults, the relationships among peers, the handling of rules and discipline, the content of the curriculum, the rigor of academic standards, the resolution of conflict, the ethos of the total school environment, the conduct of sports and other co-curricular activities, and the

treatment and involvement of parents. Every dimension of school life provides important opportunities for character development.

In our *Smart and Good High Schools* study, we describe many practices that can be used to build a schoolwide culture of character. One is the school touchstone.

***The power of a touchstone.*** In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins reports that companies making the leap from good to great performance had formed a corporate culture typically expressed in a touchstone—a creed or “way” (e.g., “The Toyota Way,” “The IBM Way”). This “way” expresses the core values of the organization, helps its members feel connected to each other through these values. In *Educating for Character in the Denver Public Schools*, Charles Elbot and colleagues observe that many schools that have created deep, sustained character education initiatives have done so with the aid of a schoolwide touchstone.

To ensure ownership by the whole school community, all stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and members of the wider community—must have a chance to provide input on a series of drafts of the touchstone statement, which may take several months to finalize. Below is the touchstone of Colorado’s Place Middle School; note its incorporation of both performance character qualities, such as “excellence” and “giving our best,” and moral character qualities, such as “being respectful, honest, kind, and fair.”

#### THE PLACE WAY

At Place School, we pursue excellence in scholarship and character.

We celebrate and honor each other by being respectful, honest, kind, and fair.

We show our cultural appreciation for each other in all that we do.

We give our best in and outside the classroom and take responsibility for our actions.

This is who we are, even when no one is watching.

***“The Roosevelt Way.”*** We visited one large high school, with approximately 3,000 students (56% African-American, 30% Caucasian, 10% Asian, 4% Hispanic), which used a touchstone, the “Roosevelt Way,” in a very deliberate manner to foster a culture of character. A character education page in the school yearbook states that the Roosevelt Way includes the core values of “respect, responsibility, integrity, honesty, and kindness,” but other than that, it is not written down. A student leader told us, “I think it would be less effective if it were written down because I believe it is something personal to every student.”

A counselor at the school explained: “There is a way that students here are expected to act, and a way that they are expected not to act. It’s defined by the Roosevelt Way.”

At the freshmen orientation, older students talk to the incoming students about what the Roosevelt Way means to them and why it’s a source of their school identity and pride. School

administrators are often on the PA asking students to demonstrate the Roosevelt Way with respect to a particular area of school life. There are references to it in the student handbook, student newspaper, and communications to parents. Freshman English teachers have their students write compositions about what the Roosevelt Way means to them.

Seniors and juniors, especially student leaders, are asked to help the younger students in the school learn the Roosevelt Way. This helps to get it into the peer culture. A senior girl said to us:

We look at the freshmen as the babies of the school. It's up to us to teach them how to act and keep them on the right track. If they're doing something wrong—using bad language in the halls, for example—we just tell them, "That's not the Roosevelt Way." I can remember when I was a freshman, I was going to skip class, and a senior girl took me aside and said, "That's not the Roosevelt Way."

When we visited, the school had just lost the game for the state football championship to its archrival. Despite the victors' trash-talk gloating, Roosevelt players and coaches wrote them a letter of congratulations when they returned to campus. The athletic director told us, "It's easy to win with class. We teach our kids to lose with class, because that's the Roosevelt Way."

Each year there is a schoolwide essay contest on the Roosevelt Way. Students' entries reflect the school's emphasis on both performance character (striving for excellence) and moral character (striving for ethical behavior). A boy wrote:

To a lot of students, the Roosevelt Way may seem like just a vague concept that the administrators use to keep us in line. But I think we all know the Roosevelt Way under different names. Those names are integrity and hard work. Our drive to succeed is what sets our school apart from others. We learn habits of diligence and integrity that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives. That is the true Roosevelt Way.

Faculty made it a point to tell us, "We're not a perfect school—we have our bad days." The day we were there, two students got suspended for fighting. But through its consistent, daily use of a touchstone, this large, multi-racial school had driven its core values deep into the school's culture.

***Participatory student government.*** There are other equally important practices for developing the ethical learning community. One is participatory student government that gives students a real voice in solving real-life school problems. Currently, in most high schools, student government doesn't govern anything. It is typically an isolated group with no constituency. Members don't represent anyone but themselves; they don't, in any systematic way, seek input from, or report back to, other students. This kind of disconnected student government has little or no power to influence the norms of the peer culture and solve problems—such as academic dishonesty, social cliques, peer cruelty, bad sportsmanship, abuse of alcohol, and sexual activity—that typically have significant roots in the peer culture.

Some schools have redesigned their student government so that it functions as a participatory, representative democracy that has real responsibility for the life of the school. In this model, elected representatives of each homeroom, family group, or selected class period (1) carry input from their group to a schoolwide meeting of all elected representatives; (2) in collaboration with adult school leaders, formulate action proposals that synthesize the different groups' ideas; (3) bring those proposals back to their constituencies for further feedback; (4) carry that feedback into the next schoolwide meeting; (5) refine the action proposals; and (6) continue this process until an action plan is adopted and implemented.

We visited one high school of about 2,000 students where the principal, no longer satisfied with meeting just with class officers to get input on school issues, instituted a representative democratic governance structure to create broader student participation in school improvement. At the beginning of the school year, the principal challenged student representatives to use the new system to develop an Honor Code, one that covered not only lying, cheating, and stealing, but also bringing drugs or weapons to school and all forms of bullying. At the end of the school year, student representatives presented the Honor Code (which had gone through many drafts, based on input from the whole school) to the entire student body at an assembly:

#### HONOR CODE

1. I will be honest and forthcoming in all my actions.
2. I will treat others the way I want to be treated.
3. I will extend courtesy, kindness, and respect to others.
4. I will respect our school building and each individual's personal property and will treat them with care.
5. I will strive for a sense of cooperation and pride in all our school programs.
6. I will have the courage to report incidents of bullying in any form, and report the possession of drugs or weapons on the school campus.
7. I will uphold this Honor Code and will exhibit these same behaviors when I represent our school off campus.

Student leaders invited all students to "take a stand for yourself and our school by signing the Honor Code as you leave today." During the following academic year, the school recorded an increase in wallets and purses being turned in with their contents intact and many more incidents of drugs being reported.

Research finds that when students experience democratic government, they are more likely to use their highest available moral reasoning to solve everyday moral dilemmas.<sup>31</sup> Ten years after graduation, students who experienced democratic student government were, as adult citizens, more likely than students who did not experience participatory school democracy to be interested in local politics and national affairs and to work with others to solve community problems.<sup>32</sup>

*Abstinence/chastity character education curricula.* Besides schoolwide strategies that develop a culture of character, schools can provide direct support for the virtue of chastity through a unit or course. Other speakers will address this strategy in depth, so let me limit my comments to calling attention to what I think is a helpful article by Dr. Stan Weed, director of the Institute for Research and Evaluation, and his colleagues in a forthcoming 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Health Behaviors*.<sup>33</sup> As we all know, abstinence education has been under attack for “not working.” Weed’s article is useful, I think, because it cites positive results for a number of abstinence education programs—such as Sex Respect, Teen Aid, Project Taking Charge, and Heritage Keepers—but also acknowledges that most of those abstinence evaluation studies to date have methodological limitations, such as lack of replication, positive results found for some subgroups but not others, small sample sizes, lack of adequate comparison groups or long-term follow-up, and so on. (Because of these methodological limitations, some critical reviews of abstinence education have not considered these studies as admissible evidence of effectiveness.)

In their forthcoming article, Weed and his colleagues also report the results of a new study of their own that avoided these methodological problems. Their study investigated the impact on 7<sup>th</sup>-graders of a program called “Reasonable Reasons to Wait: Keys to Character.” On a post-test one year later, program participants who were virgins at the start of the program were only 46% as likely as virgins in the control group (who didn’t experience the program) to have initiated sexual intercourse. Moreover, this substantial difference held up across all subgroups, regardless of race and gender. So here is a well-designed study producing solid evidence for the effectiveness of a well-crafted abstinence education program.

### **The Myth of the “Teenage Brain”**

There are lots of enemies of chastity education, including media-driven hedonism that makes sex the center of the universe; a phony ethic of “tolerance” that is completely non-judgmental about any kind of sexual behavior but highly *intolerant* of politically incorrect beliefs and traditional sexual morality; the philosophical subjectivism that denies the existence of objective moral truth; the cultural relativism that began with Margaret Mead’s now discredited *Coming of Age in Samoa* (see the devastating critique by Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman, reported in detail in W. Michael Jones’s book, *Degenerate Moderns*<sup>34</sup>) that seemed to reveal a sexual paradise where no kind of sex was taboo; the multiculturalism, dominant in our universities, that still promotes cultural relativism and inhibits moral judgment of others’ values or behaviors; and the pragmatism that is always ready to compromise moral principles



and lower the standards of what we expect from people. (We all know the pragmatic argument in sex education: “Teach abstinence as the best way, but be realistic and teach condom use as well.” Our response to that should be, “When we teach abstinence from illegal drugs, do we also teach students how to practice ‘safe drug use’? If we believe a behavior is harmful to self and others, as sex outside marriage clearly is, do we teach students how to do it anyway, or do we teach what we believe is truly in their best interest and that of society?”)

As if this panoply of opposition weren’t enough, there is, I fear, a new enemy of chastity education loose in the world that threatens to do much to undermine not only educating for chaste behavior, but even common sense. This new threat is the myth of “the teenage brain.” I am currently reading a book titled, *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries About the Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our Kids*. It quotes “brain experts” as making statements such as, “Adolescents have bigger passions . . . but no brakes, and they may not get good brakes” — meaning the maturation of the prefrontal cortex needed to inhibit impulsive behavior — “until they are twenty-five.” A few months ago I spoke at an abstinence conference that included a workshop on the implications of “the new brain research.” After my presentation, a physician who was on the board of the host group stood up and said, “All these logical arguments for abstinence are well and good, but how effective are they with a teenage brain that isn’t going to be fully developed for another ten years?”

I responded that if we brought 100 randomly selected 15-year-olds into the room, we could line them up on a continuum — from those who have never had sex or done anything reckless to those who are having sex several times a week and engaging in a lot of other high-risk behaviors. Their brains would all be 15-years old and roughly the same in their prefrontal cortical maturity. Why, then, the great variability in behaviors that call for the regulation of impulse? I added that when I was in high school, I didn’t have sex with my girlfriend not because of my state of brain maturity but because of my values. Among other things, I believed it was a mortal sin, and I wasn’t willing to gamble with my immortal soul.

In fact, statistics show that, compared to teens, American adults ages 35 to 54 are much more likely to engage in a wide range of risky behaviors. Middle-aged adults are much more likely to have fatal car accidents, commit suicide, engage in binge drinking, and require hospital treatment for overdosing on drugs.

Scientific critiques of the brain-research claims are beginning to appear. This September, *The New York Times* carried an op-ed column by Mike Males, a senior researcher for the Center on Juvenile Justice (and founder of Youthfacts.org). Males wrote:

A spate of news reports have breathlessly announced that science can explain why adults have such trouble dealing with teenagers: adolescents possess “immature,” “undeveloped” brains that drive them to risky, obnoxious, parent-vexing behaviors. But the handful of experts and officials making these claims are themselves guilty of reckless overstatement. More responsible brain researchers — like Daniel Siegel of the University of California at Los

Angeles and Kurt Fischer at Harvard's Mind, Brain and Education Program — caution that scientists are just beginning to identify how systems in the brain work. "People naturally want to use brain science to inform policy and practice, but our limited knowledge of the brain places extreme limits on that effort," Dr. Siegel said. "There can be no 'brain-based education' or 'brain-based parenting' at this early point in the history of neuroscience."<sup>35</sup>

Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* and a contributing editor for *Scientific American*, offered this rebuttal to the brain-research claims:

Teenagers are as competent as adults across a wide range of adult abilities. Research has shown that they are actually superior to adults on tests of memory, intelligence, and perception. The assertion that teenagers have an "immature brain" that necessarily causes turmoil is completely invalidated when we look at anthropological research from around the world. Anthropologists have identified more than 100 contemporary societies in which teenage turmoil is completely absent; most of these societies don't even have terms for adolescence.

Even more compelling, long-term anthropological studies at Harvard in the 1980s show that teenage turmoil begins to appear in societies within a few years after those societies adopt Western schooling practices and are exposed to Western media. Finally, a wealth of data show that when young people are given meaningful responsibility and contact with adults, they quickly rise to the challenge, and their "inner adult" appears.<sup>36</sup>

The worst mistake we can make in education — certainly the worst mistake in character and chastity education — is to underestimate the capacities of our students. A final story in support of that point: I have a friend who is now a leader in the abstinence education movement. She says that when she was a teenager, she was promiscuous. Her home life was so abusive it drove her to committing petty crimes so she could enjoy the relative safety of jail. There a counselor visited her, and she told him of her reckless sexual life style. His response was to reach out in love and challenge her toward greater self-respect and discipline. Today she is a happily married wife, mother, and respected educational leader. She says, "What would have happened if that counselor had handed me a condom instead of believing in me?"

Human beings, given the right support, tend to rise to meet high expectations. Chastity is difficult, but so is most of what is truly worthwhile in life. It is time for all of us, schools and parents, to raise the bar. Our children will someday thank us. God bless all of you for your dedication to that cause.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Y. Shoda, W. Mischel, & P.K. Peake, "Predicting adolescent cognitive and self-regulatory competencies from preschool delay of gratification," *Developmental Psychology*, 1990, 26, 6, 978-86.

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- <sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*. Trans. David Ross. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925).
- <sup>3</sup> J.Q. Wilson, *The moral sense*. (New York: Free Press, 1993), 81.
- <sup>4</sup> W. J. Schickel, "The case for chastity, a civic virtue," *The Ithaca Journal* (November 13, 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> K. Parker, "Even children corrupted by society's sex obsession," *Orlando Sentinel* (April 1, 1999).
- <sup>6</sup> W. Shalit, *A return to modesty: Discovering the lost virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> D. Eden, *The thrill of the chaste* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006).
- <sup>8</sup> J.R. Williams, "Ethical sexuality," in T. Devine et al. (Eds.), *Cultivating heart and character* (Chapel Hill, NC: Character Development Publishing, 2000).
- <sup>9</sup> Originally published by the Christian Action Council but no longer in print.
- <sup>10</sup> Thanks to Father David Pivonka for this quote.
- <sup>11</sup> J. Evert, *Pure manhood* (San Diego, CA: Catholic Answers, 2006), [www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com).
- <sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Kristine Napier's book, *The power of abstinence* (Avon, 1996), for the first seven of these rewards and to Janet Smith, formerly of the University of Dallas and author of *Contraception: Why not?*, for the last three.
- <sup>13</sup> A. Nicholi, "A new dimension in the youth culture," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 131, 396-401.
- <sup>14</sup> M. W. Waller, et al., "Gender differences in the association between depressive symptoms and patterns of substance abuse and risky sexual behavior," *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 9, 139-50, 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> A. Patrick Schneider, M.D., "Cohabitation," *New Oxford Review* (September, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> Schneider, 37.
- <sup>17</sup> Thanks to Mary Beth Bonacci for this point.
- <sup>18</sup> Sean Covey, *The 6 most important decisions you'll ever make* (New York: Fireside, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Child Trends Brief (September, 2002), [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org).
- <sup>20</sup> S. Covey, *The 7 habits of highly effective teens* (New York: Fireside, 1998).

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- <sup>21</sup> The full *Smart & good high schools* report can be downloaded free from our Center's website ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)).
- <sup>22</sup> For further examples of self-study and other-study, see *Smart & good high schools* (pp. 29-30) and "Smart & good high schools: A new paradigm for character education," in L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> T. Devine, J.H. Seuk, & A. Wilson (Eds.), *Cultivating heart and character: Educating for life's most essential goals* (Chapel Hill, NC: Character Development Publishing, 2000).
- <sup>24</sup> Barbara Lewis, *What do you stand for?* (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998).
- <sup>25</sup> D. Cole & M. Duran, *Sex and character* (Richardson, TX: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 1998).
- <sup>26</sup> For information about Love and Life at the Movies, contact Onalee McGraw at [Onalee@egionline.org](mailto:Onalee@egionline.org)
- <sup>27</sup> M. R. Newland, *The saints and our children* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1958).
- <sup>28</sup> S. Covey, *The 7 habits of highly effective teens* (New York: Fireside, 1998), 82.
- <sup>29</sup> Stephen Covey, 129.
- <sup>30</sup> Sean Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (New York: Fireside, 1998).
- <sup>31</sup> C. Power, A. Higgins, & L. Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1989).
- <sup>32</sup> E. A. Grady, *After cluster school: A study of the impact in adulthood of a moral education intervention project*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1994.
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- <sup>34</sup> E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate moderns: Modernity as rationalized sexual misbehavior* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993).
- <sup>35</sup> M. Males, "This is your (father's) brain on drugs," *The New York Times* (September 17, 2007).
- <sup>36</sup> R. Epstein, "Let's abolish high school," *Education Week* (April 4, 2007).