

WHY WAIT FOR MARRIAGE?

Young persons are thinking human beings, and they need a way to think about sex that will ground them and make their decisions solid. It's clearly not enough just to encourage them to "wait." They want to know what they're waiting *for*. To get to college? To turn a certain age? Until they feel "ready"? Or until they're in a mature, committed relationship where sex makes sense because it expresses and deepens that genuine commitment?

Historically, of course, we've called such a commitment marriage. Saving sex for the committed relationship of marriage has many benefits—for ourselves, the children we might bring into the world (whose chances of school and life success are dramatically better with two parents), and society as a whole. But a "save sex for marriage" message must be expressed in rational terms that appeal to young people's intelligence. Different teachers and parents will choose different ways of articulating this vision. Here are three approaches.

"The Ultimate Intimacy Belongs Within the Ultimate Commitment"

Sex is so special it deserves a special home. It's most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it's part of something bigger—a continuing, loving relationship between two human beings. 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. Of course, saving sex for marriage, by itself, doesn't guarantee a successful marriage; that requires hard work and sacrificial love from both spouses. But marriage is the best place for sex because it's the most serious, total, and public commitment between two people that human society has ever been able to devise.

Here's a second approach, a little more philosophical but one that adolescents can still get their minds around:

We're all made in such a way that certain choices or ways of acting "work" and make us happy, and others don't. There's a law that governs human nature and human relationships, just as there's a law that governs physical nature. Toss a ball up, and it comes down. Treat people badly, and you lose their respect and eventually your self-respect. Actions have consequences.

What are the natural consequences of having sex? Bonding and babies. If you have sex with someone, you're very likely to create an attachment, a bond. If you have sex, you may also create a new human life, even if you're trying to avoid that.

Both of these consequences—an emotional attachment and a new life—can be the source of great happiness in a relationship where two people have made a real commitment to stay together. But if a binding commitment doesn't exist, the emotional attachment created by sex will, in most cases, be broken—causing emotional pain. And if a secure commitment doesn't exist, then a child brought into the world won't have two parents to love and raise him or her. A child born out of wedlock who grows up without a father, for example, is more likely to have problems in school, problems in peer relationships, and problems later in life.

And here's a third approach that brings religion into the picture. If you have religious faith as a parent, you'll want to integrate that into the moral upbringing of your child. Even public school teachers can objectively describe religious world views—in the spirit of teaching *about* religion, something that the Supreme Court's 1963 decision (which banned school-sponsored prayer) actually urged schools to do as part of their responsibility to educate students about their cultural heritage. A teacher can introduce a religious vision of sexuality by saying, for example, "A public school can't constitutionally promote religion, but it has an obligation, as a matter of fairness, to include religious perspectives along with other views." For example:

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.—*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*