

Character-Based Sexuality Education Bringing Parents into the Picture

Working together, schools and families can provide a character-based approach to sexuality education that will protect young people from the harmful effects of a permissive society.

All across the United States, character education is regaining its historically central place in the mission of public schools. Schools and communities are finding that they can agree on teachable virtues—such as honesty, fairness, hard work, and compassion toward the less fortunate—that are the basis of strong personal character and a just, democratic society.

Enter sexuality education, arguably the ultimate challenge for character education. In our pluralistic society, is there any more divisive issue than how to teach our children about sex?

While some aspects of our sexual culture are getting worse, increasing numbers of young people are opting for restraint.

Yet all of us who care about children share a common impulse: to create a safe and decent world for our children to grow up in and to do everything we can to set them on the path to a happy and fulfilling life. We also sense that they are perhaps most vulnerable, most at risk physically and emotionally, in the sexual area of their lives. The wrong decisions there can carry a very high, often life-altering cost.

Is it possible to apply the principles of character education—which holds that right and wrong do exist and that parents and schools have a shared responsibility to teach it—to sexuality education? Especially at the middle and high school levels, character education will be irrelevant to young people's deepest needs if it doesn't help them apply moral standards to sex. And if families and schools don't form an alliance against a highly sexualized media culture, we are throwing our children to the wolves.

How to Bring Parents into the Picture

How can schools forge a partnership with parents to educate for character—genuine respect, authentic responsibility, and self-control—in the sexual domain?

1. *Issue a wake-up call.* A "Dear Parents" letter from the principal can call attention to the toxic sexual environment our children face. If I were writing such a letter, I'd include highlights of a recent *New York Times* article (Jarrell, 2000) in which mental health professionals tell of an increasing number of preteenagers struggling with the effects of having had sex too soon and of girls in 7th and 8th grade—even some in 6th—who consider themselves virgins but who have had oral sex 50 or 60 times. In the same article, 8th grade boys outline a timetable for sexual initiation that progresses from kissing games in 4th grade to intercourse in 8th or 9th. An administrator at the school the boys attend says that she thinks their description is accurate.

Parents were called to a meeting after 5th graders began pairing off. The head of the middle school reported that half the parents "were appalled at the prospect of 10-year-olds dating. The other half thought it was cute. . . . They want their kids to be liked, and if dating is what it requires, then they're for it" (p. 9).

The article noted that the sexuality-education curriculum at this private school "includes practice exercises in how to put on a condom for 8th graders and free condom distribution in high school. But there is disagreement about distributing condoms with fruit flavoring, for use during oral sex" (p. 9).

Questions for reflection: In what ways are the parents by their attitudes and the school by its safe-sex program enabling these kids' behaviors? What price might these children pay for their early sexual activity?

One indication of the price is suggested by Orr, Beiter, and Ingersoll (1991), who report that the attempted suicide rate for sexually experienced girls between the ages of 12 and 16 is six times higher than it is for girls that age who are virgins. Sexually active girls are also 18 times more likely to run away from home and 10 times more likely to use marijuana. Similar patterns of behavior are found among sexually experienced boys, with the exception of suicide.

The gender difference in suicide points to the special emotional hazards for girls. Shalit (1999, p. 65) suggests that the rise of eating disorders is in part a desperate effort by young women to regain control in a world



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where sex has spun out of control. Moreover, the bodily harm that girls do to themselves appears to be getting worse. Besides eating disorders, there is now the increasingly common practice called “delicate self-cutting,” in which girls mutilate themselves.

As parents, we should also be concerned about what happens when our children go off to college. These days the common campus term for having sex (oral or traditional) is “hooking up.” Hooking up is considered no big deal (Shalit, 1999).

The sexual practices of today’s teens trivialize sex, observes social historian Leon Kass (1997). Such practices do not prepare them for the higher responsibilities of adult life, including the serious commitments of marriage and parenting. Their marriages, when they get around to them, are weaker and fail more often. Their children then suffer, and so do they.

2. Provide historical perspective. To solve a social problem of this scope, we need to understand its roots. How did we get to where we are today?

Throughout history, societies have considered sexual self-control a mark of good character. This ideal, however, was swept away by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which advanced the notion that people should be free to

have sex without the strictures of marriage, without commitment, and even without love. The new contraceptive technology of the pill severed the link between sex and procreation, enabling individuals to exercise their sexuality without concern for the quality of their relationships or the character of their partners.

Even earlier, the 1948 report by Alfred Kinsey had shocked Americans by seeming to show that all kinds of sexual activities outside of marriage were far more common than anyone had supposed. Lost in the media sensation that followed were serious critiques of Kinsey’s work as bad science because of his unrepresentative samples (Jones, 1993). Such criticisms, however, have only recently led to his being widely discredited as a data source. For decades, Kinsey was an oft-quoted influence in helping to legitimize the ideology of the new “comprehensive sexuality education.”

The new sexual permissiveness was reflected in the guidelines of groups like the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) and Planned Parenthood, which dominate the sexuality-education field. SIECUS, for example, suggested that teens explore “safe-sex practices” such as “mutual masturbation” (Haffner,

1988, p. 9). Elementary school curricula stressed getting children to be “comfortable” using sexually explicit vocabulary (always in coed settings). Critics observed that this undermined the natural sexual modesty of children that is part of healthy sexual development and a crucial support for abstinence in adolescence.

The sexual revolution promised greater happiness, but four decades later, it’s clear that our society suffers from an epidemic of problems stemming from the breakdown of sexual morality. Among these are sexual promiscuity, teen pregnancy, unwed births, the highest teen abortion rate in the developed world, an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), a cluster of emotional and behavioral problems associated with premature sex, widespread sexual harassment, an enormous pornography industry, and the sexual abuse of children.

3. Share the good news. Parents need to know that despite this bleak picture, there’s hope. As parents, we should point out the positive trends to our children: High school virgins are now in the majority (52 percent) for the first time in 25 years in the United States. Among high school boys, who account for most of the change, the increase in students not having had intercourse rose from 39 percent in 1990 to 51 percent in 1997 (Curtin & Matthews, 1998). In an Alan Guttmacher Institute poll, 6 of 10 American teens said that schools should teach sexual abstinence outside of marriage (Gallup, 1995). On the Higher Education Research Institute’s 1997 *American Freshman* survey (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, p. 58), the percentage of entering college students agreeing with the statement “If two people really like each other, it’s all right for them to have sex even if they’ve known each other only for a very short time” dropped from 51 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 1997.

4. Encourage parents to talk with kids about sex. Studies show that when we talk with our children about sex, they are less likely to get sexually involved. In my own family, we often discussed at the dinner table kids’ letters to Dear Abby, such as “Dear Abby: I’m

15, I'm pregnant, and I'm scared to death to tell my folks. What should I do?" We read the letter but not Abby's answer (that came at the end), then went around the table, each saying what advice we thought Abby should give. This gave us a chance to talk about our belief that sex is the beautiful gift of a good God but one meant for marriage.

Research shows that teens with faith-based convictions are more likely to abstain from both sex and drugs than their less religious peers (Wallace & Williams, 1997). Whatever their views on religion, all parents who want to make the case for waiting will appreciate help with the "words to say" about why it's right to wait. Here's one possibility:

Sex is most meaningful and fulfilling when it's part of a continuing relationship between two human beings. The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment; you join your bodies because you've joined your lives. Sex before marriage separates sexual love from the committed love relationship that it's meant to express.

Parents who themselves had premarital sex sometimes avoid the subject of sex because they worry, "What if my child asks, 'Did *you* have sex before you were married?'" Some parents have found it valuable to discuss their past mistakes and their desire for their children to make wiser choices. Alternatively, a parent can say, "It's enough for you to know that like all kids, I made my share of mistakes when I was growing up. As a parent, it's my job to help you avoid mistakes that can hurt you now and in the future."

5. Help parents discuss the dangers. Parents should know that condoms don't eliminate the risk of pregnancy or the risk of AIDS (Weller, 1993). Condoms also provide little or no protection against the three most common STDs (because the germs can be transmitted by skin-to-skin contact in the whole genital region) that infect roughly a third of sexually active teens: (1) human papilloma virus (HPV), the cause of nearly all cervical cancer; (2) chlamydia, the fastest growing cause of infertility; and (3) herpes, which causes

genital sores (Medical Institute for Sexual Health, 1994).

More important, parents should talk to their children about the emotional and spiritual consequences of sex outside a committed relationship. These consequences can include regret; a crisis pregnancy; the aftermath of an abortion; feelings of being used; self-contempt; fear of commitment after being hurt emotionally; rage or depression after the rupture of a sexual relationship; damaged future relationships; and (from a faith perspective) jeopardizing one's relationship with God.¹

6. Identify the rewards of waiting. Napier (1996) lists these rewards:

- Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.

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- Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person you are).

- Waiting will increase your self-respect and gain the respect of others.

- Waiting teaches you to respect others; you'll never pressure anyone.

- Waiting takes the pressure off you.

- Waiting means a clear conscience and peace of mind.

- Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons and based on trust).

Most young people still have a happy marriage as an important life goal. We should ask our children, "What will help you find the right person?" University of Dallas Professor Janet Smith points out that by practicing the virtues involved in waiting—self-control, modesty, good judgment, courage, and genuine respect for self and others—individuals develop the kind of character that will attract the kind of person they'd like to marry. Our children should also know that studies in the United States, Canada, and Sweden find that couples who cohabit before marriage are much more likely to

divorce (Myers, 1992).

7. Give guidelines: How far is too far? Children hear a lot about avoiding intercourse but not as much about where to draw the line short of that. Eager (1988) offers guidelines: You're going too far when either a guy's or a girl's hands start roaming, you are doing something you wouldn't be doing around someone you really respect, or you are arousing genital feelings. From this perspective, saving sex for marriage means saving *all* of it for marriage.

8. Provide supports for leading a chaste life. Parents who want to help kids wait should set a good example by their own sexual behavior; restrict access to sexually provocative television, movies, Internet sites, and other media (and discuss with kids the rationale for

those restrictions); keep close tabs on what kids are doing; delay one-on-one dating and strongly discourage steady dating or dating someone who is more than two years older (both predictors of sexual involvement); and, if they have a faith tradition, encourage their children to commit to the True Love Waits pledge.²

9. Build trust regarding the school's program for sexuality education. Every school should send home its sexuality-education lessons, along with a message such as this: "You are your child's most important sexuality educator. We encourage you to modify these lessons on the basis of your own values and wishes for your child."

Schools should also invite parents to participate in classes. In one school, 10th grade teachers invited parents to join the discussion of how to avoid sexual activity on dates (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000). The parents got to hear firsthand the reality of peer pressure, curiosity, and boredom that often lead to teen sexual activity. Students offered ideas such as group dates, more

involvement in sports and drama, and no-alcohol parties. Parents then offered their advice to students.

10. *Offer a course for parents and children.* Twenty-five years ago, the public schools of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, adopted an elementary school human-sexuality program called Learning About Myself and Others (LAMO). Parents and children voluntarily attend classes together at the school. When the teacher poses a question, each child works on it with his or her parent. Parents help their children clear up misunderstandings. Take-home materials promote discussion.

Parents report that the LAMO program has helped them create the trust that enables them to communicate openly with their children as they move through the secondary school years. The pregnancy rate for students who have participated with their parents in the program has remained near zero throughout their middle and high school years.

11. *Adopt a character-based program for sexuality education.* Finally, if a school really wants to support parents in helping children develop character, avoid premature sex, and prepare to be good marriage partners and parents, it should choose a character-based sexuality-education curriculum that aspires to those goals. Educators now have many well-designed programs to choose from.³

Character-based sexuality education—sometimes incorporated into a “marriage education” course—teaches five key ideas.

- Abstinence is the *only* medically safe, emotionally healthy, and morally responsible choice for unmarried teens. Abstinence means avoiding not only sexual intercourse but also other forms of genital contact and sexual intimacy that may lead to intercourse and that in themselves violate true respect for self, others, and the special meaning of sex.

- Condoms don’t make sex physically safe, emotionally safe, or ethically loving.

- Abstinence is the best marriage preparation—not just best for you but also best for your future spouse, your future children, and your community and nation (Kittel, 2000).

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- Waiting until marriage to have sex is an excellent way to develop self-discipline, respect for others, caring, courage, and other important qualities.

- If you haven’t waited, you have the power to choose “renewed virginity” in the future and regain the benefits of an abstinent lifestyle.

The abstinence or character-based approach recognizes that some teens will be sexually active no matter how well the school teaches character and abstinence. But in sexuality education, as in all areas, the school’s educational and ethical responsibility is to teach what is right—what is truly in the best interests of students and society.

When schools teach abstinence from drugs, for example, they do not simultaneously teach “drug-active” students how to practice “safer drug use.” As a matter of moral principle, if the school judges something to be wrong—harmful to self and others—it doesn’t teach students how to perform the wrong behavior. Rather, it teaches them the right standard, the skills and character strengths needed to live up to it.

If schools teach waiting until marriage, they will inevitably face the question, “What about persons with a homosexual orientation?” One appropriate way to respond is to cite the recommendation of the U.S. Department of Education’s guidebook *AIDS and the Education of Our Children* (1987, p. 17):

Regardless of sexual orientation, the best way for young people to avoid AIDS and other STDs is to refrain from sexual activity until as adults they are ready to establish a mutually faithful monogamous relationship.

It’s also important to tell students that homosexuality is a controversial issue in our society and that some people think homosexual relations are morally acceptable and others do not. Schools are practicing sound character education if they teach respect for the dignity and human

rights of all persons regardless of sexual orientation but do not undermine the beliefs of many families (or denigrate them as “homophobic”) by promoting approval of all sexual lifestyles.

According to an Alan Guttmacher Institute study, one in three schools now employs an abstinence-only/character-based approach to sexuality education (Meckler, 1999). Evaluations of a number of abstinence-education programs have been shown to have a positive impact.⁴ For example, Best Friends, implemented in Washington, D.C., with African American girls, combines adult mentoring, a supportive peer culture, academic goal setting, training in refusal skills, and a pledge to avoid sex, drugs, and drinking. An evaluation (Rowberry, 1995) found a 1 percent pregnancy rate among Best Friends students in grades 9 through 12 compared with 26 percent of high school-aged African American girls in Washington, D.C., overall, and a 22 percent sexual activity rate for Best Friends high school students compared with a 73 percent rate for nonparticipants.

A Closing Story

“Melanie,” now a health educator, was sexually promiscuous as a teenager. Her home life was so abusive it drove her to committing petty crimes so she could enjoy the relative safety of jail. There she told a counselor of her reckless sexual lifestyle. 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 recognized speaker on abstinence. She says, “What would have happened if that man had handed me a condom instead of believing in me?” (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000, p. 382).

If we know anything in education, it’s that human beings, given the right support, rise to meet high expectations. In sexuality education, it’s time for all of us—schools and parents—to raise the

bar. Everybody is talking about "abstinence" these days (the old comprehensive model has even been renamed "abstinence-plus"), but if we still include "safer sex" in the message, we're selling kids short. We can do better. Indeed, for the sake of our children and our country, we must. ■

¹Send an e-mail (charact@corns@cortland.edu) for stories about consequences.

²Visit the Pure Love Alliance (www.purelove.org).

³The *Directory of Abstinence Resources* is available from the National Abstinence Clearinghouse; (888) 577-2966 (www.abstinence.net).

⁴See the Spring and Summer 1998 issues of *Sexual Health Update*, available from the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, P.O. Box 162306, Austin, TX 78716-2306.

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