

—from Thomas Lickona, *CHARACTER MATTERS: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2004)

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT SEX, LOVE, AND CHARACTER

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.

— A 22-YEAR-OLD YOUNG WOMAN

I wish someone had been preaching abstinence in my ear when I was in high school. That was when my sexual activity started. I don't even want to think about my college years. I wish I had saved this for my wife.

— A 26-YEAR-OLD HUSBAND

Sandy, a bright and pretty girl, asked to see her 9th-grade health teacher, Mr. Bartlett, during lunch period. She explained that she had never had a boyfriend, so she was excited when a senior asked her out.

After they dated for several weeks, he asked her to have sex with him. She was reluctant, but he persisted. She was afraid of appearing immature and losing him, so she consented.

"Did it work?" Mr. Bartlett gently asked. "Did you keep him?"

Sandy replied: "For another week. We had sex again, and then he dropped me. He said I wasn't good enough. There was no spark."

She continued: "I know what you're going to say. I take your class. I know now that he didn't really love me. I feel so stupid."¹

Brian, a college senior, recounts his first sexual experience:

I first had intercourse with my girlfriend when we were 15. I'd been going with her for almost a year, and I loved her very much. She was friendly, outgoing, charismatic. We'd done everything but have intercourse, and then one night she asked if we could go all the way.

A few days later, we broke up. It was the most painful time of my life. I had opened myself up to her more than I had to anybody, even my parents. I was depressed, moody, and nervous. My friends dropped me because I was so bummed out. I felt like a failure. I dropped out of sports. My grades weren't terrific.

I didn't go out again until I got to college. I've had mostly one-night stands. I'm afraid of falling in love.²

As parents and educators, we worry about many areas of our children's decision-making—sex, drugs, drinking, drinking and driving—where the wrong choices can carry a high cost. But we sense that they are most vulnerable, most at risk emotionally as well as physically, in the sexual area of their lives. The damage to our children's health, heart, and character from premature sexual involvement may go deeper, and last longer, than the effects of any other mistakes they might make.

"I'm 42 years old," a high school teacher said to me after a workshop on this topic, "and I'm still dealing with emotional issues stemming from sexual relationships when I was young." Because sexual decisions have such important life consequences, a strong home-school partnership—committed to helping our children make wise choices—is nowhere more important than it is in this domain.

Sex, however, is delicate territory. The potential for controversy is higher here than in any other area of education. But four decades after the sexual revolution, there is emerging common ground. Abstinence is now recognized to be the wisest choice for many reasons. More than a half-million unmarried teens get pregnant each year. Having a baby when you are an unmarried teenager is the surest route to poverty for you and your child. One in three sexually active singles gets an STD by age 24. Until the mid-1970s, there were only two common STDs—syphilis and gonorrhea; now there are more than 20.

Condoms haven't solved these problems. The typical annual failure rate for adult couples using condoms to prevent pregnancy is 14%; the failure rate for teens can go as high as 30% because alcohol or drug use often reduces their ability to use condoms correctly or at all. Over the past 20 years, teens have shown the greatest increase in the use of condoms but simultaneously the greatest increase in STDs. A 2001 National Institutes of Health report, summarizing hundreds of studies, concluded that condoms reduce sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS by 87% (if used 100% of the time), provide

about 50% protection against gonorrhea, but *provide no proven protection against six of the leading eight STDs*, including human papilloma virus (the cause of virtually all cervical cancer), chlamydia (the fastest growing cause of infertility), and herpes.³ One reason condoms don't provide better protection against STDs is that the germs can be passed on by skin-to-skin contact in the whole genital region, only part of which is covered by the condom. (For a summary of the NIH results and related research, see the publication *Sex, Condoms and STDs: What We Now Know*, www.medinstitute.org⁴)

SEX AND THE HUMAN HEART

For human beings, of course, sex is about much more than the body. Our entire person is involved. That's why sex has uniquely powerful emotional and spiritual consequences. And there is no condom for the heart.

To educate adequately about human sexuality, both schools and parents must therefore address the emotional hurts and regrets that commonly follow temporary sexual relationships. According to a 2000 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 72% of teenage girls and 55% of boys who have had sexual intercourse say they wish they had waited.

Many adults also express sexual regrets. A young married woman confided to her counselor: "I had a lot of partners before marriage. I know it's affected my ability to bond with my husband." Says John Diggs, M.D., a physician-abstinence educator who talks to students about human relationships: "You can have many friends, but it just doesn't work to have many sexual partners." Research finds that couples who were not sexually involved before marriage and are faithful to their spouse during marriage are more satisfied with their current sex life than those involved sexually before marriage or engaged in extramarital affairs.⁵

Although the emotional fallout from uncommitted sex is only recently getting attention, we've known about it for a long time. At a 1999 "Beyond Relativism" conference at George Washington University, Dr. Armand Nicholi, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, commented:

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.

Because sex has profound personal and social consequences, ethical sexuality⁶—acting with respect for oneself and others—must be considered part of good character. Sex education must therefore be character education. It must, as Boston educator Kevin Ryan points out, teach students that learning to bring self-discipline to their sexuality is a means of developing their character and preparing themselves for a deep, loving relationship as an adult.

A SEXUALLY TOXIC ENVIRONMENT

For both schools and families, the task of teaching sexual self-control is made much more difficult by the fact that young people today are growing up in a world that pushes sex at them constantly. A mother of an 8th-grader picked up a copy of *Teen People* magazine for the first time and was “amazed . . . it was page after page of young teens dressed in very provocative ways and in very provocative poses.”⁷

An 8th-grade boy quoted in *The New York Times* said his interest in sex began in 3rd-grade when he started watching “Beverly Hills 90210.” “The people were cool,” he said. “I wanted to try what they were doing on the show.”

James Coughlin, author of the abstinence education program *Facing Reality*, comments: “We socialize kids to have sex. No culture in human history has ever done this to its children.”

Faced with this moral environment, what strategies can we use to teach our children to make good sexual choices, ones that will build their character and protect their heart, health, and happiness?

1. BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT KIDS NEED IN ORDER TO AVOID PREMATURE SEX

To exercise sexual wisdom in today’s world, young people need three things: (1) internally held convictions about why it makes sense to save sexual intimacy for a truly committed relationship; (2) strengths of character—such as good judgment, self-control, modesty, genuine respect for self and others, and the courage to resist sexual pressure and temptation; and (3) support systems for living out this commitment—including, ideally, support from their families, faith communities, schools, and at least one good friend who has made the decision to wait.

2. POINT OUT THE POSITIVE TRENDS

We can take heart from the fact—and should certainly point out to our children—that despite all the pressures, growing numbers of young people are not getting sexually involved.

A December 2002 *Newsweek* cover story titled “The New Virginité” reported the Centers for Disease Control’s latest data: High school students who have *not* had sexual intercourse are now in a majority (52%) for the first time in 25 years. Moreover, only one-third of 3 students say they are “currently sexually active.”⁸ Most of this change is accounted for by an increase in the virginité rate—up more than 10% in the 1990s—among high school boys.⁹

3. HELP KIDS UNDERSTAND WHY SOME YOUNG PEOPLE GET SEXUALLY INVOLVED

Kids are less likely to be pulled into sexual activity themselves if they have insight into why some of their peers do get sexually involved. Knowledge is power. As parents and educators, we can help young people step back from the scene and understand the many factors that can lead to sexual activity.

1. Sexual attraction. Human beings are sexual creatures; we are sexually interested in and attracted to others. Sexual desire doesn’t *compel* anyone to have sex, but in the absence of inhibiting counterinfluences it can easily lead to sexual activity.

2. No good reason not to. “I got sexually involved,” says a college senior, “because I couldn’t answer the question, ‘Why shouldn’t I have sex?’”

3. Partner pressure. Pressure from a partner—a boyfriend or girlfriend they wanted to keep—is the reason teens most often cite for their initial decision to have sex.¹⁰

4. Desire to express love. Many young people think sex is simply a natural way to express the love they feel for each other.

5. Desire to be normal. Says a high school health teacher: “In recent years, many kids have gotten it into their heads that there is something wrong with them if they haven’t had sexual intercourse by the time they’re 16.”

6. Early dating. A study in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* found that of those who began single dating when they were 7th-graders, 71% of boys and 90% of girls had intercourse by the time they graduated from high school.¹¹ Of those who did not begin single dating until age 16, only 16% of boys and 18% of girls had sexual intercourse by high school graduation.

7. Steady dating. The same study found that steady dating, which typically increases the time a couple spends alone, significantly increased the likelihood of sexual intercourse.

8. Need for intimacy. Many young people, especially girls, turn to sex to try to meet the need for intimacy. “If Dad isn’t there giving non-sexual attention,” says one psychologist, “a girl will often go after sexual attention from boys.”

9. Low self-worth. Says a girl who got pregnant at 15: “My brothers and their girlfriends said if you didn’t do it, you were a nerd. I had always been sort of an outcast, and I didn’t want to be called a nerd.”

10. The search for identity. Says Cheryl Jones, an adolescent therapist: “I see girls who up until now have been the perfect kid—straight As, followed all the rules. Then they turn 15 or 16, and they think, ‘I don’t want to be just what my parents want me to be.’ They know what they *don’t* want to be, but they don’t know what *to* be—so they become the opposite, a kind of anti-personality.” (Becoming one’s own person as a teenager is less likely to involve this kind of rebellion if parents, from childhood on, have been helping their children to define their own interests and sense of self.)

11. A change in environment. For some young people, sexual activity starts when they enter a new environment such as college, where there is the potential to live much more freely.

12. Parental permissiveness. Fourteen-year-old Courtney complained that her parents “let me go over to my boyfriend’s house when they know his parents aren’t home. That is weird.” Eventually, she and her boyfriend had sex.

13. Parents’ example. Says a high school boy who lives with his divorced father: “What’s the big deal about sex? A lot of my dad’s girlfriends spend the night.”

14. Nothing better to do. In the South Bronx, New York, where the teen pregnancy rate is nearly twice the national norm, a community agency sponsored an essay contest for adolescents on the question, “How Can the Problem of Teenage Pregnancy Be Solved?” One of the winning essays argued that many teens have sex “because they are bored—they have nothing better to do.” One pregnancy prevention program found that when teens got involved in community service, the pregnancy rate dropped.

15. Sex education that doesn’t send a clear abstinence message. Says a high school boy in Los Angeles: “They pass out condoms, teach pregnancy-this and STD-that, but they never really say it’s wrong.”

16. Sexual abuse. One in four girls and one in six boys is sexually abused by age 18. Sexually abused youth, often because of their low self-worth, are more likely to become sexually active—often with older partners.

17. Drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol impair moral judgment and weaken inhibitions. Teens who say they have used drugs or been drunk in the past month, for example, are much more likely to have had sex than teens who have never been drunk or used drugs.¹²

18. A highly sexualized environment. A sexually stimulating media culture sends the unrelenting message that sex is the center of the universe. Add to this, the sexualized peer environment created by young people themselves, including increasingly provocative dress.

4. TALK ABOUT WHAT COUNTS AS “SEX”

Given the fact that many young people are having oral and even anal sex and still think they’re “virgins,” we want to be sure to talk about what counts as “sex.” Here, for example, are some things we can say about oral sex:

1. Oral sex is definitely a sexual act. That’s why they call it oral *sex*.
2. It’s usually something boys ask girls to perform on them.
3. No boy who truly cares about or respects a girl would ever ask her to do this.
4. *All* of the sexually transmitted diseases can be passed on through oral sex. Doctors, for example, report seeing more and more teens with oral herpes.
5. If you engage in oral sex, especially if you’re a girl, you are in danger of experiencing the same emotional hurts—low self-esteem, feeling used, feeling degraded—that can follow uncommitted sexual intercourse.
6. If you’re a boy and are getting girls to do this, even if they seem willing, you are abusing the girl (would you want somebody doing this to your sister?) and abusing your own sexuality (is this something you want the person you may marry to know?).
7. If you engage in this behavior, you’re not treating your body with reverence for the sacred gift that it is.

Most parents and educators will also want to give guidance about “how far is too far.” Not everyone will agree on where to draw the line, but I think it’s best to draw it conservatively—for example, at “brief hugs and light kissing.” We can explain: “Sex is progressive. If you’re strict with yourself, you won’t find yourself struggling with the

temptation to go a little bit farther the next time.” A high school counselor put it this way: “If you don’t want to drive over a cliff, don’t pull up to the edge and race the engine.”

5. TEACH KIDS NON-SEXUAL WAYS TO BE INTIMATE

Since many kids are looking for love when they get involved in sex, both parents and schools need to talk to them about what real intimacy is and how to achieve it.

True human intimacy means knowing another person—their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams—and being known by them. We have to *learn* how to attain this kind of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intimacy. If we don’t learn this, we’ll be handicapped in our adult relationships—in our marriages and our relationships with our children.

We can teach young people—and have them practice it at school and at home—the skills of intimacy, such as the art of asking questions that draw out the inside of another person and create meaningful and enjoyable conversation. Questions such as:

- *What are two things you really enjoy doing?*
- *What are two things you’re good at?*
- *Who is someone you admire? Why?*
- *What’s one of your greatest achievements in life so far?*
- *What is a way you’ve helped another person? A way another person has helped you in your life?*
- *What’s one way you’ve changed as a person?*
- *What was a disappointment that was tough to deal with when it happened but helped you become a stronger or wiser person?*
- *How do you make decisions about important things?*
- *What do you worry about?*
- *What is something you have strong beliefs about?*
- *What is something in your life that you’re grateful for?*
- *What are two of your most important goals in life?*

- *What is your concept of God, if you believe there is a God? When do you feel closest to God?*

6. OFFER A VISION

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. In schools, saving sex for the committed relationship of marriage is increasingly being presented to students as a decision that has many benefits—for them, the children they may bring into the world (whose chances of school and life success are dramatically better with two parents), and society as a whole. To be effective, however, a "save sex for marriage" message can't be delivered in soapbox fashion with preachy moralizing. It has to be offered as a vision with persuasive power, expressed in rational terms that appeal to young people's intelligence.

Different teachers and parents will choose different ways of articulating this vision. Here is one approach:

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*

8. TALK ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL DANGERS OF UNCOMMITTED SEX

What are the various emotional dangers of uncommitted sex that we should be aware of as adults and help young people name and understand? Here are ten:

1. Worry about pregnancy and disease. Becky, 13, first had sex with her 15-year-old boyfriend. She knew her parents and other family members would be hurt if they found out. When she missed her period, she went into a panic. She even had thoughts of committing suicide. Finally, she confided in her grandmother, who took her to get a pregnancy test. To Becky's great relief, it was negative. With her grandmother's support, she decided she didn't want to go through that again and broke up with her boyfriend.

Says Russell Henke, health education coordinator in the Montgomery Public Schools: "I see kids going to the nurse in schools, crying a day after their first sexual experience, and wanting to be tested for AIDS. For some, it's enough to cause them to stay away from further sexual involvement."

2. Regret and self-recrimination. Both guys and girls can suffer sharp regret following a sexual relationship, but girls are usually more vulnerable. A girl who sees sex as a way to "show you care" may feel cheated and used when the boy doesn't show a greater romantic interest after the sexual experience. Says a 15-year-old girl: "I didn't expect the guy to marry me, but I never expected him to avoid me in school."

Sometimes the regret goes in the other direction; a person feels trapped after a relationship turns sexual. Says a 16-year-old girl: "I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about. Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. I'd like to end this relationship and date others, but after being so intimate, it's awfully tough."

Guys who get emotionally as well as sexually involved with a girl can also suffer deep regrets. Here's one who did:

A year ago I started dating a girl two years younger. We fell head over heels in love. When I would go to her house, her folks would go to bed early so we could be alone.

We started necking a little, and then all the time. I started getting a little fresh, and she resisted, but she finally gave in for fear of losing me. Before we knew it, we had gone too far.

We started feeling guilty about what we were doing, but we consoled ourselves that we were in love and that as soon as she was out of school, we'd be

married. Then one night we had a terrible argument, and although it had nothing to do with sex, I know it would never have happened if we had been behaving ourselves.

Anyway, she hit me, and I hit her back. I have never forgiven myself for that. She went running home and told her mother *everything* that happened between us. You can imagine what happened after that.

I was going to college at the time. I couldn't keep my mind on my studies. Finally, I knew I was flunking out, so I quit college and joined the Navy. I saw her on the street just once before I left for basic training. She cried and told me she still felt the same about me, but it was too late then.

I'd give anything in the world if she had stuck by her guns and I hadn't been so persistent. Any girl who thinks she has to put out to keep a guy is crazy. I would have stayed with her if she had only let me hold her hand. But I was selfish.¹³

3. Guilt. Guilt is a special form of regret—a strong sense of having done something morally wrong. A 16-year-old boy in California said he stopped having sex with girls when he saw and felt guilty about the pain he was causing: "You see them crying and confused. They say they love you, but you don't love them."

Guilt after sex may stem from one's religious convictions. Lucian Shulte, a Roman Catholic, says his parents taught him the importance of chastity, and he had always planned to wait until he was married to have sex. But then one warm summer night, he found himself with a girl who was very willing—and they had intercourse. It was over in a hurry and lacked any intimacy. He says:

In the movies, when people have sex, it's always romantic. Physically, it felt good, but emotionally it felt really awkward. I was worried that our relationship was now going to be a lot more serious than it was before. It was like, "Now what is she going to expect from me?"¹⁴

He felt guilty about what he had done and also worried about pregnancy and disease. He promised himself, never again.

Now, as a college student, he's still faithful to that decision. Lucian's story is an example of "renewed" or "emotional" virginity. It shows that regardless of past mistakes, a young person can start over. We need to emphasize that point with our students and children: You can't change the past, but you can choose the future.

Many teens—more than 300,000 a year—turn to abortion when they find themselves facing a pregnancy. As both sides of the abortion debate now acknowledge, abortion ends a developing life (there's a beating heart at 18 days, measurable brain

waves at 6 weeks). Many women experience guilt and other emotional repercussions after abortion, sometimes right away, sometimes years later. Here, for example, is a column by a young mother, now in her early 30s, about the abortion she had when she was in college:

It was my sophomore year. I came back from winter break sick as a dog. The doctor in the campus infirmary took a urine test and told me in a non-judgmental way that I was pregnant. "What would you like to do?" he asked. "I want to get rid of it," I said. He quietly wrote down the phone number and address of the local Planned Parenthood.

The "procedure" was surprisingly simple. There was strong cramping, but I could handle that. If someone had asked me right then how I felt about what I had just done, I would have said, "Wow, this is great! I have my health back, I have my life back!"

Go ahead, ask me now. I am, at this moment, crying.

How callous I was. Just a kid, really. Self-centered and shallow. There were, and are now, so many other alternatives.

I am humbled by my two amazing living children. Most of all, I am humbled by my friend, Amy. She felt so strongly for her miscarried unborn child that she gave the child a name and a funeral. I didn't give mine a second thought—until I grew up.¹⁵

Guys, too, can suffer from the emotional aftershocks of abortion. Bottom line: Abortion is not a quick fix. Our children need to know that.

4. Loss of self-esteem and self-respect. Many persons suffer a loss of self-esteem after they find out they have a sexually transmitted disease. John had not heard of human papilloma virus (HPV) before he had sex with his girlfriend. Soon after, he noticed some small bumps on his penis. His physician told him he had genital warts caused by HPV. The warts did not respond well to acid treatment, laser techniques, and excisional surgery. After protracted unsuccessful treatments, he began to worry if he would ever be able to marry because of the warts.¹⁶

Sometimes the loss of self-esteem after uncommitted sex leads a person into further sexual relationships of a demeaning nature. Says a college senior who works as a residence hall director:

There are girls in our dorm who have had multiple pregnancies and multiple abortions. Because they have so little self-esteem, they will settle for any kind of attention from guys. So they keep going back to the same kind of

destructive situations and relationships that got them into trouble in the first place.

On both sides of dehumanized sex, there is a loss of dignity and self-worth. A 20-year-old college guy confides: "You feel pretty crummy when you get drunk at a party and have sex with some girl, and then the next morning you can't even remember who she was."

5. *The corruption of character.* When people treat others as sexual objects, they not only lose self-respect; they corrupt their character in the process.

Frequently, sex corrupts character by leading people into lying to get sex. Common lies: "I love you" and "I've never had an STD." In one study, three-fourths of men who knew they had a sexually transmitted disease said they had sex without telling their partners about their infection.

The Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center, in a 1988 survey of 1,700 students grades 6 to 9, asked, "Is it acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if they've been dating for more than six months?" Sixty-five percent of the boys said yes. So did 49% of the girls.¹⁷

Sex that isn't tied to love and commitment undermines character by subverting self-respect, self-control, and responsibility. Unchecked by a moral code, sexual desires and impulses easily run amuck and lead to habits of exploiting others.

6. *Shaken trust.* Young people who feel used or betrayed after the break-up of a sexual relationship may experience difficulty with trusting in future relationships. They don't want to be burned again. This can happen to both sexes.

7. *Rage over betrayal.* Every so often, the media carry a story about a person who had a rage reaction following a ruptured sexual relationship. Not long ago, our local paper carried a story about a 27-year-old guy named Scott who had been living for a year and a half with his girlfriend Linda. They had made plans to marry. Then, with no warning or explanation, she moved out of their apartment.

Scott said, "I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep." When he found that Linda girlfriend was dating another guy, he lost it, went into a jealous rage, and stabbed her new boyfriend to death.

It's true that people often feel angry when somebody breaks up with them, even if sex hasn't been involved. But the sense of betrayal is usually much greater if sex has been part of the relationship.

8. *Depression and suicide.* Given what we know about the emotional aftermath of broken sexual relationships, it is reasonable to think that the pain from such break-

ups is a factor in the suicide deaths of some young people. According to a 1991 study in the journal *Pediatrics*, 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.¹⁸ Dr. Kirk Johnson reports 2003 data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health showing that boys between 14 and 17 who are sexually active are significantly more likely to feel depressed and attempt suicide than boys who are not sexually active.

9. Ruined relationships. Sex can turn a good relationship bad. Says 24-year-old Karen:

With each date, my boyfriend's requests for sex became more convincing. After all, we did love each other. Within two months, I gave in. Over the next six months, sex became the center of our relationship. At the same time, new things entered—anger, impatience, jealousy, and selfishness. We just couldn't talk anymore. We grew very bored with each other. I desperately wanted a change.¹⁹

10. Negative effects on marriage. Most teens say they dream of being happily married someday. As parents and teachers, we can help them orient toward this goal by asking: “If you have this dream, what sexual decisions at this point in your life will help you attain it? What problems might be caused by being sexually intimate before marriage?” Here are four such problems:

Comparisons. Says one young husband: “When I make love with my wife, I think, ‘This girl could kiss better,’ or ‘This girl could do that better.’ I can’t get rid of the comparisons.”

Infidelity. Studies reported in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* find that persons who are sexually active before marriage are more likely to be unfaithful to their spouses after marriage.

Infertility. One in five newly married American couples cannot conceive a baby. Infertility is a tremendous stress on a marriage. If it was caused by a sexually transmitted disease such as chlamydia, the stress is even greater.

A greater chance of divorce. Sex can also fool you into marrying the wrong person. Comment John and Kathy Colligan, experienced counselors of couples preparing for marriage: “We see many engaged couples who are living together. We find out by talking with them that they have little in common. They haven't discussed their values and goals. We can see that this is a marriage likely to fail—and time after time, it does.”

Seven different studies, summarized in David Myers's book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, all find that couples who lived together before their marriage are significantly more likely to divorce than couples who did not live together.²⁰ If you really want to get

to know somebody and find out whether you want to spend your life with that person, sex can make that harder, not easier, to do.

8. DISCUSS THE REWARDS OF WAITING

Important as it is to discuss the dangers of uncommitted sex, it's also important to help young people identify, in positive terms, benefits of saving sex for the truly committed relationship of marriage. Here are nine rewards of waiting:²¹

1. *Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.*
2. *Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person you are).*
3. *Waiting will increase your self-respect.*
4. *Waiting will gain the respect of others.*
5. *Waiting teaches you to respect others (you'll never tempt or pressure anyone).*
6. *Waiting takes the pressure off you.*
7. *Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).*
8. *Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons, 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 and that will attract a person of character—the kind of person you'd like to marry and would like to be the father or mother of your children.*²²

9. TALK ABOUT TOUGH ISSUES

We need to address three other sexual issues, ones that adults often find hard to talk about but that young people need guidance on especially in today's sexual culture.

Pornography. The Internet has made pornography more accessible to youth of all ages. According to one survey, kids under the age of 17 spend 65% more time on Internet pornography sites than they do on game sites.²³

We can say to young people: “Pornography debases sex. It violates the dignity of the human person and the dignity of the human body. It treats people as sex objects. It also puts images in our minds that we may not be able to forget, even when we want to.”

Pornography is also addictive. Like other addictions, it brings short-term pleasure but then starts to run your life. It will lower your self-respect.²⁴

Later on, the habit of pornography can cause marital problems. Wives whose husbands are involved with pornography often feel demeaned, betrayed, and isolated from their husbands—victims of a kind of spiritual adultery.

For males, the use of pornography is also usually accompanied by masturbation. These two habits then reinforce each other, making it harder to break either one.

Masturbation. “Expert” advice regarding masturbation has swung between extremes—from doctors in the 19th century attributing various diseases and even insanity to this habit, to recommendations by some 20th century sex educators encouraging the young to masturbate as a healthy way to “explore their sexuality” and as a safe alternative to intercourse. Many parents, however, without resorting to scare tactics, wish to gently but firmly help their children resist this temptation. For some parents, the reason may be religious—their belief that sex is meant by God to be relational, an expression of love between two persons. “The problem with masturbation,” as one father explained to his 13-year-old son, “is that it’s having sex with yourself.” There are also psychological considerations: Once masturbation becomes a habit, it is hard to stop and may lessen a young person’s feelings of self-respect. Many teens use masturbation as a way to escape emotions of anxiety or depression, and end up feeling worse because the problem is still there. Carried into marriage, the habit of masturbation can weaken the attraction between husband and wife and cause problems in their sexual relationship.

Homosexuality. There is no scientific consensus about the factors influencing sexual orientation. Columbia University researchers William Byne and Bruce Parsons reviewed 135 studies on sexual orientation and concluded: “There is no evidence at present to substantiate a biological [genetic] theory, just as there is no evidence to support any single psychological explanation.”²⁵

Some young people are unsure of their sexual orientation in their teens. By adulthood, however, only about 2% of the population self-identify as homosexual.²⁶

Several studies have found a significantly higher risk of attempted suicide among teens who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. For each year’s delay in bisexual or homosexual self-identification, however, the odds of a suicide attempt diminish significantly.²⁷ Higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological

problems have been found among adults who report “some homosexual experience in the past 12 months” even in a country such as the Netherlands, where social attitudes are more accepting of homosexual relationships and same-sex couples have the legal right to marry.²⁸ In February 2003, the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* reported a study of 103 pairs of twins, one of whom homosexually active and the other not; the twin who was homosexually active was over five times more likely to experience suicidal symptoms.

If your child thinks he or she may have a homosexual orientation, above all you want to maintain a loving relationship. You can do this, however, without approving of homosexual activity. Parents who for moral or religious reasons do not approve of homosexual sex can stress the distinction between having an attraction to the same sex and acting on it sexually. All young persons should be strongly encouraged to practice abstinence to avoid the physical and psychological dangers of uncommitted sexual activity. The risks of homosexual activity are even greater than those of heterosexual activity. Homosexually active males have been found to be at greater risk for HIV, hepatitis, gonorrhea, anal cancer, and gastrointestinal infections. Homosexually active females (the great majority of whom, at some point, also have sex with males) have been found to be at greater risk for bacterial vaginosis, Hepatitis B and C, and having sex with men who are high-risk for HIV.²⁹ If your child experiences a homosexual attraction, it’s wise to seek competent professional counseling from someone whose values and beliefs are consistent with your own. (The psychiatrist Richard P. Fitzgibbons, M.D., is a helpful source of referrals in this area; email him at R82488@aol.com)

All parents and teachers, as a matter of moral principle, should also teach young people to treat every person, regardless of sexual orientation, with love, justice, and respect.

10. IMPLEMENT CHARACTER-BASED SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Schools, for their part, must do all they can to support parents in helping young people make sexual decisions that are truly in their best interest and the best interest of society. The best way to do that is to implement character-based sex education. Increasingly taught as part of a course on marriage and parenting (the best context), character-based sex education teaches five key ideas:

- 1. 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.**

2. **Condoms don't make sex physically safe (you can still get pregnant or catch a disease), emotionally safe (you can still get hurt), or ethically loving (you can't claim to love someone if you're gambling with their health and happiness).**
3. **Abstinence is the best marriage preparation—not just best "for me" but also best for my future spouse, my future children, and my community and nation.³⁰**
4. **Waiting until marriage to have sex is an excellent way to develop self-discipline, respect for others, caring, courage, and other important qualities of character.**
5. **If you haven't waited in the past, you can make a different choice in the future.**

One of the most promising ways to implement character-based sex education is to recruit and train high school students to teach the curriculum to their younger peers. For example, schools and youth organizations in more than six states now participate in *Peers Educating Peers* (www.peersproject.org), a federally funded abstinence education project that trains high school juniors and seniors to teach a grades 6-10 curriculum. Says 18-year-old Savannah Smith, who graduated from the program: “It really helped to hear it from the high school students. They were close to our age and were encouraging role models.”

A. C. Green's Game Plan (www.ProjectReality.org) is an abstinence curriculum that stresses making a “game plan” for avoiding and handling pressures and temptations.³¹ For teachers and parents of high school students, *Sex and Character* (www.fteinfo.com) is a highly readable resource that deals intelligently with sex, love, dating, and marriage. A small book for teens that presents the medical, moral, emotional, and spiritual reasons to save sex for marriage is *Sex, Love & You: Making the Right Decision* (Tom and Judy Lickona, with William Boudreau, M. D.; www.avemariapress.com). The Institute for Youth Development (www.youthdevelopment.org) is developing a primer on marriage that can be easily integrated into any abstinence education course. Marline Pearson's *Love U2: Getting Smarter About Relationships, Sex, Babies, and Marriage* (www.buildingrelationshipskills.org) is curriculum that focuses on an area where some abstinence programs are weak: developing the skills that make for successful relationships. For a comprehensive directory of wait-till-marriage curricula, books, and speakers, contact the National Abstinence Clearinghouse (www.abstinence.net).

One can't emphasize too strongly to young people that in the sexual area of their lives, as in any area of behavior, they have the power to make a fresh start. Says a 16-year-old girl: “I've had sex with a lot of guys, but I was always drunk so I didn't think it mattered. Now I realize that I gave each of those guys a part of myself. I don't want all

that pain anymore. I'm going to make a new beginning and not have sex again until I'm married."³²

If we truly care about kids, of course, we will do everything we can in our classrooms and families to help them avoid the pain of premature sex in the first place. As we prepare to educate our children about this crucial area of their lives, we would do well to keep in mind the words of the essayist Lance Morrow: "You cannot light a candle in a high wind. What is needed for adolescent development to occur is shelter, safety. A context of abstinence is the beginning of such shelter."³³

Finally, if we want to call forth the best in our children, the case for waiting should go beyond appealing to their self-interest. We should also appeal to their sense of moral responsibility. We should ask them to consider, What kind of life do I want for a child that I might bring into the world? Do I want to give my child every chance to grow up healthy and happy, with two committed parents? And how do I wish to affect the life of a person I am involved with? Do I want to have it on my conscience that I caused someone to get a sexually transmitted disease, lose the ability to have a baby, or suffer emotional problems?

In the current culture, sex may often seem like a casual thing. But sex is an act that is full of consequences. Sex, as one philosopher observed, is essentially deep. That's a very good reason to save it for marriage, the deepest and most loving commitment two people can make to each other.

¹ Bob Bartlett, "Going all the way," *Momentum* (April/May, 1993), p. 36.

² Abridged from *Choosing the best: A values-based sex education curriculum* (5500 Interstate North Parkway, Suite 515, Atlanta GA. 1993).

³ National Institutes of Health, *Scientific evidence on condom effectiveness for sexually transmitted disease prevention* (www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds/condomreport.pdf), 2000.

⁴ *Sex, condoms, and STDs: What we now know* (Austin, TX: Medical Institute for Sexual Health, 2002) www.medinstitute.org

⁵ Guenter Lewy, "Religiousness and social conduct." Paper presented at "Beyond Relativism" conference, George Washington University, June, 1999.

⁶ John R. Williams, "Ethical sexuality," in T. Devine *et al.* (Eds.), *Cultivating heart and character* (Chapel Hill NC: Character Development Publishing, 2000).

⁷ Kim Painter, "The sexual revolution hits junior high," *USA Today* (March 15, 2002).

⁸ To access data on sexual activity among high school students, visit the Centers for Disease Control web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrbs/2001/index.htm>

⁹ Source: Centers for Disease Control, *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 49, no. SS-5, June 2000.

¹⁰ For poll data see Tom and Judy Lickona, with William Boudreau, M. D., *Sex, love & you: Making the right decision* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1994).

¹¹ Brent C. Miller, J. Kelly McCoy, and Terrence D. Olson, "Dating age and stage as correlates of adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1986.

¹² Stan Weed, *Predicting and changing teenage sexual activity rates* (Salt Lake City: Institute for Research and Evaluation, 1992).

¹³ George Eager, *Love, dating, and sex* (Valdosta, GA: Mailbox Club Books, 1992).

¹⁴ Lorraine Ali and Julie Scelfo, "Choosing virginity," *Newsweek* (December 9, 2002).

¹⁵ Susan Wilson, from a column reprinted in *The American Feminist* (Washington, D. C.: American Feminists for Life, 1996).

¹⁶ Medical Institute for Sexual Health.

¹⁷ J. Kikuchi, "Rhode Island develops successful intervention program for adolescents," *National Coalition Against Sexual Assault Newsletter* (Fall, 1988).

¹⁸ D. Orr, M. Beiter, and G. Ingersoll, "Premature sexual activity as an indicator of psychosocial risk," *Pediatrics*, vol. 87, 141-147.

¹⁹ Josh McDowell and Dick Day, *Why wait* (San Bernadino: CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1987).

²⁰ David G. Myers, *The pursuit of happiness* (New York: Avon, 1993).

²¹ I'm indebted for the first seven of these "rewards of waiting" to Kristine Napier's book, *The power of abstinence* (New York: Avon, 1996).

²² Thanks to Janet Smith for this point.

²³ Statistics taken from *NetValue report on minors*.

²⁴ Sean Covey, *The 7 habits of highly effective teens* (New York: Fireside, 1998).

²⁵ William Byne and Bruce Parsons, "Human sexual orientation: The biological theories reappraised," in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 50, no. 3.

²⁶ Robert Michael *et al.*, *Sex in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁷ Gary Remafedi, "Risk factors for attempted suicide in gay and bisexual youth," *Pediatrics*, vol. 87, no. 6, 1991.

²⁸ Theo Sandfort, Ron de Graaf, *et al.*, "Same-sex sexual behavior and psychiatric disorders," *Archives of General Psychiatry* (January 2001).

²⁹ John Diggs, M. D., *The Health Risks of Gay Sex*. (Scottsdale, AZ: Corporate Resources Council, 2002). For a copy, e-mail Dr. Diggs at diggsthis@aol.com.

³⁰ Thanks to Robert Kittel for this point.

³¹ Scott Phelps and Libby Gray, *A. C. Green's game plan abstinence program* (Golf, IL: Project Reality, 2001).

³² Mary-Louise Kurey, *Standing with courage* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2002).

³³ Lance Morrow, "Fifteen cheers for abstinence," *Time* (October 2, 1995).