

Parents Want Traditional Values in Sex Ed Ex-Department of Education Official Explains How

By Linus Wright

Any parent who is not worried about the problem of sexual promiscuity among young people is either naive or else insensitive. More than 1 million teenage girls become pregnant each year; and of these, more than 400,000 have abortions and another 250,000 give birth out of wedlock.

Those statistics only begin to hint at the suffering, the sorrow, the ruined lives that are the inevitable by-product of an increasingly permissive society. For every unmarried teenage couple "in trouble," there are usually two sets of parents, grandparents, and brothers and sisters who are potential co-sufferers, as well as family, friends and schoolmates. There are also the children of such liaisons, surely the greatest sufferers of all and the most blameless.

But pregnancy is no longer the only worry among those concerned about teenage promiscuity. Sexually transmitted diseases increasingly pose a threat to the health and lives of all who engage in irresponsible sexual behavior, and young people are increasingly at risk. The permissiveness of American society over the past twenty years has exposed a generation of teenagers to a variety of medical dangers that were known in an earlier time only to the most jaded and irresponsible of adults. And there is no reason to believe that things are improving significantly. Indeed some medical authorities predict that promiscuous conduct among young people will be even more dangerous in two years than it is today.

It is understandable that in the wake of such social devastation educators are attempting to devise ways in which the schools can help the family in this area — and the result has been a renewed push for required sex education in the classroom. In fact, legislatures in more than 30 states have mandated such courses as part of AIDS-prevention programs; and in some cases these courses are prescribed for kindergarten through the 12th grade.

The idea of such courses has upset a number of people who believe in traditional, moral and social values; and while I am a lifelong believer in public schools, I sympathize with those parents who are reluctant to see the educational system assume the burden of sex education at this particular moment in our history. I have no objections to schools offering sex education of a certain sort. Indeed, I think such courses can perform a useful service to the community. For example, I see no reason why young people of 13 and 14 should not receive basic instruction on human sexuality in their biology classes. Taught in the same way that other systems of the body are taught, these classes can teach young people all they need to know about the physiological aspects of this subject. Such information is useful and can be presented objectively and scientifically.

Unfortunately, many high school courses go far beyond the proper limits of biology in exploring this subject — and they do so at the urging of organizations that are philosophically committed to values that run counter to those held by more traditionally minded people.

Many of these courses stress the idea that young people have a "right" to be "sexually active" if they want to, that society has no

legitimate role in prescribing sexual conduct for its members. Sometimes the courses contain explicit and detailed instructions in erotic behavior. A few are obscene by most people's standards. I am convinced that such programs are very damaging to young people and have contributed to the permissive atmosphere that exists in our society today.

Parental Involvement Discouraged

I am also concerned about the failure of many schools to share their plans for sex education with parents. Several nationally prominent programs begin with statements that warn against parental involvement or suggest that the inclusion of parents would be ill-advised. For example, in one widely used curriculum the following note appears in the opening section, "How to Begin the Program":

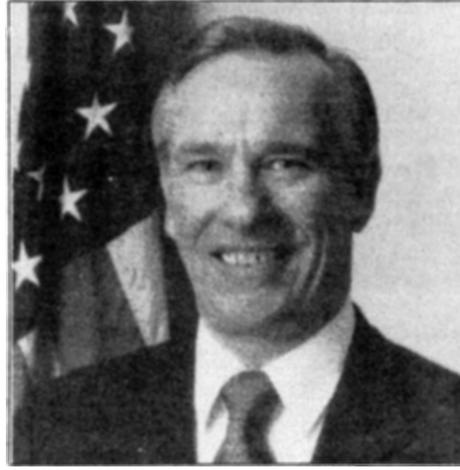
"*Caution:* Participants should not be given extra copies of the form to show to their parents or friends. Many of the materials of this program, shown to people outside the context of the program itself, can evoke misunderstanding and difficulties."¹

This popular program includes highly explicit color slides of both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse, as well as audiocassettes of homosexual males and lesbians who talk about the pleasure and satisfaction they derive from their deviant behavior. One of the stated purposes of this program is: "To make clear that sexual relationships with the same sex during youth are normal and do not necessarily indicate one's future sexual orientation as an adult."² Small wonder the author warns that these materials, shown to parents, "can evoke . . . difficulties."³

Many high school courses go far beyond the proper limits of biology in exploring this subject.

Other texts are similarly cautionary in their instructions to teachers. Some even suggest that the very purpose of the program would be subverted were parents to be informed about course contents, since, as a recent program puts it: "one of the primary developmental tasks for teens is to separate from their parents."⁴ If "to separate from their parents" means to adopt a different set of moral values, then I believe the public school system has no business deliberately encouraging students to do such a thing.

Fortunately, most public school officials are respectful of what the community believes and go out of their way to make sex education curricula compatible with family values. If, however, you live in one of those communities where the schools have initiated programs at variance with your religious or moral beliefs, then you may need to take one of several steps to make certain that your children are not subjected to potentially unhealthy indoctrination.



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Dealing With the Teacher

I. The first step in determining the nature of your children's sex education program is to examine the contents. If you don't feel competent to judge the quality or bias of the materials then ask for help from someone whose opinion you value. For example, you might enlist your pastor, since clergy usually have the training and critical judgment, to assess the meaning of the written word. If you know other parents who share your concern, then ask one or more of them to join you in this evaluation.

When you have decided who is to accompany you, then call and make an appointment with the teacher or school nurse in charge of the program. Be as polite and as specific as possible. Tell the instructor you are interested in what kind of sex education your child is receiving and would like to look over the materials used. Ask if your child can bring home a copy of the materials before your meeting so that you can review everything at your leisure. Be sure to ask for videocassettes and audiotapes as well, since they are often the most vivid and provocative materials used.

If the instructor agrees to furnish these materials and gives you everything you ask for, then chances are you have little to worry about. Most of the genuinely destructive programs warn the teacher to keep texts and tapes from parents at all costs. However, when you receive the materials, examine them carefully, noting questionable or objectionable segments.

In so doing, don't be too picky. Chances are that even the instructor doesn't think the program is perfect; and if you quibble over minor points, you may forfeit your credibility when you address major points.

If the instructor refuses to send the materials home then ask that they be assembled for you when you have your meeting. Be sure to reserve at least an hour so you will have time enough to review everything used in the course. Ask if there are copying facilities available in case you want to reproduce a page for closer scrutiny.

How to Evaluate Programs

In evaluating materials and in your discussions with the instructor you should ask the following questions:

A. *Does the program encourage young people to engage in sexual intercourse or does it send a clear message of abstinence and self-restraint?*

Many bad programs mention abstinence in an initial sentence or two, then devote the balance of their presentation to a discussion of erotic behavior in explicit detail. Balance and proportion are important elements to consider in evaluating the total impact of sex education materials.

B. *Does the program violate community standards of taste and decency?*

This is a difficult question to answer objectively, and you should not make the mistake of assuming that what you find indelicate or insensitive would necessarily offend a substantial portion of the community. So you might want to seek help from a cross section of your friends. Ask others what they think. Listen carefully to their answers. Write them down. In discussing this criterion with instructors or administrators it is much better to say, "Ten people I questioned found this passage objectionable," than to say "This passage offended me."

Parents know just as much about what is and isn't good for society as teachers do.

C. *Does the program present traditional viewpoints toward sexuality as well as those of more permissive individuals and organizations? If so, does it present them in comparable detail and with the same degree of objectivity or sympathy?*

Again, these are difficult questions to answer, and you should be careful to use criteria that are as logical and unbiased as possible: amount of space (or time) devoted to each point of view, the use of "weighted" language, the presentation of all available evidence. For example, in examining programs that touch on the subject of birth control devices, you should make certain that negative as well as positive statistics appear. According to generally accepted studies, the failure rate of condoms to prevent pregnancy is 10% overall and 18% for women in their middle and late teens. And there is reason to believe the failure rate in the prevention of diseases such as AIDS may be the higher of these two figures. These studies should be cited in discussing such an important issue as birth control and disease prevention.

D. *What selection process was used in choosing this particular program?*

It is important to find out whether or not other programs were considered. If they were, then you might want to see if any were "abstinence programs." Ask for specific names of curricula that were rejected. Then ask for the criteria used in making a final decision. If other options were not explored, then you should ask why they weren't.

Also, you should ask who was involved in the selection process. Were outside "experts" consulted, and if so, then who were they and how were they chosen?

If you feel the process has been unfair, you
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might want to give the instructor or principal information concerning programs that emphasize abstinence. These have increased in popularity over the past few years, largely because of their measurable success. For example, "Teen Aid," an abstinence program used at San Marcos (California) Jr. High School, reports a reduction of pregnancies from 147 in the 1984-85 school year to 20 in 1986-87.⁵ When asked, "Are you now more willing to say 'No' to sex before marriage?" 69% of students completing the "Sex Respect" program answered affirmatively, as opposed to 16% at the beginning of the program.⁶ And "The Community of Caring" program reports only 3% repeat pregnancies of unwed mothers taking the course, compared with a national average of 15%.⁷

E. What is the purpose of the program now in place?

There are many possible answers to this question and in some cases several of them could apply. One answer might be, "To teach teenagers the biological facts of reproduction." Another might be, "To teach young people to abstain from sexual intercourse until maturity and marriage." Still another might be, "To teach students to minimize the dangers of pregnancy and disease while engaging in premarital intercourse." One of the common answers given to explain the more destructive programs goes something like this, "To teach young people to clarify their own values concerning sexuality so they can make intelligent decisions regarding their own conduct." Such an approach — the so-called "values clarification" approach — is

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deceptive in its appeal to fairness and objectivity. In fact, values clarification curricula usually tell young people that they can do anything they want to with little or no regard for parental or societal inhibitions. One of the pioneers of this approach, educational psychologist W. R. Coulson, has termed such education a failure and has said of the student exposed to it: "The outcome (confirmed in the research) is that he's become more likely to give in to what before he would have seen as temptation to be resisted. Now he sees it as a developmental task, a 'risk of further growth.'"⁸

In dealing with such programs, you should ask instructors and administrators whether or not they would apply the same "even-handed approach" to such issues as murder and racism. Teenage sexuality is a major problem in America today largely because too many young people think they have the right to make decisions for themselves, even though they are in no position to bear the financial and emotional costs of

pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease such as AIDS. To suggest they are mature enough to decide about such questions independent of community codes and norms is to fly in the face of all the statistics on pregnancy and disease collected in recent years.

Be sure that the stated purpose of the program is comprehensive enough to explain those parts you find most objectionable. If the official purpose of the program is "to teach young people the basic biological facts about human reproduction" then it is justifiable to ask why entire segments are devoted to such subjects as homosexual conduct and petting.

The public school has no business deliberately encouraging students to adopt a different set of morals from their parents'.

Dealing With the Principal

II. If the instructor refuses to show you the program or if you have questions that remain unanswered, then you probably need to talk to the principal of the school. Some principals keep a close watch on the classroom activity of their teachers while others try to give instructors a freer rein. There are arguments in favor of both approaches. However, every good principal should be concerned when parents believe that something is going on in the school that undermines the values of the community. If you have such a complaint, then in all likelihood the principal would prefer that you voice it directly rather than repeat it throughout the community. So when you call for an appointment, you should again specify exactly what is bothering you and give an account of your efforts to resolve your doubts about the program.

In setting up the appointment remember that your best approach will be in the role of a parent seeking information rather than as someone who already has all the answers and wants to pick a fight. If you come to the principal as a calm and reasonable person, then your own position on these matters will seem more credible.

At the same time, you should make your own position clear from the outset and give the distinct impression that you are interested in all the facts before you decide what to do about the problem. Perhaps the principal is likewise worried about this particular course or instructor. Perhaps your testimony is precisely what is needed to generate some action. Don't assume that the principal will necessarily prove to be an adversary, but be prepared for anything. A good principal will back up an experienced teacher until given sufficient reason to do otherwise.

If you have not been granted access to the materials used in the class then request that the principal obtain the texts and tapes for you. Explain that you are simply trying to determine what is going on in that particular class or unit, that the subject matter includes sensitive materials about which any responsible parent should be concerned.

If the principal refuses to intervene in your behalf to obtain the materials, then you have a right to know why. He may reply that the instructor is merely exercising his or her academic freedom in choosing materials without interference from parents. Such an argument may or may not be legally defensible. While teachers usually have some leeway to choose course materials, in many cases the state prescribes certain approaches and publishes a list of approved texts, particularly in the field of sex education. Several state legislatures (e.g., Oklahoma, California) have passed bills defining

precisely what should and should not be taught in the classroom. Others (Alabama, North Carolina) have developed their own authorized texts to be used in every school. You might write or call your state board of education to find out what laws and procedures are in force in your state.

In addition, you might want to check with a lawyer to determine if your state has a "Freedom of Information Act" and if it applies to textbooks and other materials used in the public schools. In many states the law specifies that all documents and materials used by public agencies must be made available to the public upon

personally; but if you don't know any member or if you live in a larger city, you should make inquiries and find out who on the board is most traditional in opinion and in voting habits. Then call and make an appointment.

Remember, however, that it is not ordinarily the function of a school board member to intervene in the day-to-day operations of the school. The board's responsibility is to set general policy and to oversee the management of the school district. Its chief duties are financial in nature, and most board members would deny their competence to judge classroom materials.

However, they are responsible for the establishment of policies and procedures within the district, and if the state's Freedom of Information Act or policy on sex education is being abused, then they are a legitimate avenue of appeal. Do not, however, make your case exclusively on the merits of the materials. Say that you have come to a board member because board policies are being ignored or violated and you have received no satisfaction from the instructor or principal or superintendent. If state laws are being violated, then point out precisely how. If you have yet to see the materials used in the course, then request the board member to get them for you. Such a request — particularly where state law forbids the withholding of such documents — is reasonable and should be entertained with some sympathy.

How to Evaluate Programs

Ask the following questions:

- Does the program encourage young people to engage in sexual intercourse or to practice abstinence and self-restraint?
- Does the program violate community standards of taste and decency?
- Does the program present traditional and permissive viewpoints toward sexuality, and, if so, does it present them in comparable detail and objectivity or sympathy?
- What selection process was used in choosing this particular program?
- What is the purpose of the program now in place?

At the same time, be advised that many school board members have received briefings from staff members on such subjects as sex education and that they may therefore be predisposed to dismiss your request as coming from an annoying and potentially dangerous crank. It is a sad fact that a number of well-financed organizations support permissive sex education programs and in their literature provide ammunition to school administrators and board members, telling them how to deal with parents who come to meetings to complain about specific approaches and objectionable materials.

Board members quickly learn to tell parents they are too inexperienced to speak on the subject of education, that all the experts oppose their point of view, that scientific evidence proves them wrong, that they are trying to impose their morals on others, and that they are the only people in the community who have raised such complaints.

When parents have attempted to combat these charges by bringing in experts of their own, board members are sometimes advised to say that these people are outside agitators, brought in to stir up trouble. Of course most boards would never mistreat members of the community who appeared before them, either in public or in private. Yet some parents around the country have reported such experiences to

request, with the single exception of personnel files, which may contain information of a highly personal and confidential nature. Many parents throughout the country have obtained classroom materials by invoking a Freedom of Information Act, though sometimes they have had to take the matter to court.

I would advise you to avoid this kind of confrontation if at all possible. Most teachers and principals are reasonable when faced with a strong and unswerving will; and I am willing to bet that if you continue to go through channels, you will eventually get what you want without threats or legal action. Principals are more likely to be pragmatic and accommodating than teachers, though such is not always the case.

Dealing With the Superintendent

III. If your principal is adamant and confrontational, then you may want to talk with your superintendent of schools. The superintendent is responsible for what happens in the entire district, and all principals report to him or her. A superintendent is sometimes elected and sometimes appointed, so you may be dealing for the first time with someone directly responsible to the voters of the community and hence more sensitive to widespread dissatisfaction among parents and other adult groups.

Most superintendents have come up through the system, been teachers and principals, and therefore have a certain sympathy for those under their jurisdiction. On the other hand, superintendents are usually more experienced and therefore more likely to know the limits to which a classroom teacher is entitled to go in the use of questionable materials and in the encouragement of values contrary to those of parents.

If you have followed the chain of command, then you should be able to gain an appointment with your superintendent (or with a key staff member) and to make the source of your dissatisfaction clear. The superintendent can assess the validity of your case, then interview the principal and make whatever recommendations seem appropriate under the circumstances.

As a former superintendent, I can say that when parents came to me, the first thing I did was to make certain they had talked with both teacher and principal first. Certainly it would never have occurred to me to refuse an interview to anyone who had followed proper procedures before seeking my intervention.

Dealing With the School Board

IV. However, if you don't get anywhere with your superintendent, you should consider visiting a member of the school board. If you live in a small town, you may know one of these people

my office. For this reason, I offer the following replies to such attacks.

1. *Parents don't know enough about education to speak with any authority. Only professional educators have enough experience to make decisions on curricular matters.*

The question of what kind of sex education to offer in schools is a matter of great concern to all citizens, since it involves the basic values of the community rather than such purely academic considerations as teaching methodology. It's one thing to argue that schools should teach biology or sex education, and quite another to maintain that young people should be taught that sexual intercourse prior to marriage is a matter of "personal choice" and that homosexuality is a "normal and even desirable lifestyle."

In order to clarify this point, let's take an example in another area — that of racial prejudice. It is one thing for schools to decide that a course in race relations should be taught, quite another to argue for an approach that stresses the right of each student to his own opinion on the question of bigotry, or which suggests that Martin Luther King and Hitler represent two equally valid "alternate lifestyles."

The truth is, racism is bad for society. It causes terrible problems and eventually costs human lives. It goes against the basic tenets of our religious heritage, as summarized in the Golden Rule. But even if there were no religious principles involved, racism would still be destructive to the community and therefore a bad attitude to condone.

Likewise, sexual license is bad for society. It causes terrible problems and eventually costs human lives (thousands are now dead of AIDS). It goes against the basic tenets of our religious faith. But even if there were no religious principles involved, sexual promiscuity would still be destructive to the community and therefore a bad attitude to condone.

Parents know just as much about what is and isn't good for society as teachers do; and while parents can't prescribe teaching methods or particular textbooks, they can certainly give expert testimony on what teenagers should believe and how the wrong kind of sex education can undermine family values.

You also might want to remind the board that they too are not trained experts, yet sit in judgment on everything that happens in a school system, including classroom activities. They, like parents, must judge the larger consequences of what's being taught in the schools; so they, least of all, have the right to impugn the qualifications of those parents who intelligently question what's going on.

2. *All the experts agree that explicit and "non-judgmental" sex education courses are the best and most effective means of preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.*

There is virtually no educational issue of any consequence on which all the experts agree — and certainly not this one. A number of experts are highly critical of programs that tell young people sexual promiscuity is a valid option for them and that all they need to do is take certain precautionary measures to avoid "undesirable consequences."

Expert Opinion Against Explicit Sex Ed

• After examining a number of alternatives, a team of researchers at the U.S. Department of Education recommended abstinence programs as the best means of combatting AIDS among young people.⁹

• Dr. Melvin Anchell, psychiatrist and author of several books on human sexuality, has written:

— "Some educators have a compulsion to teach sex, beginning with the three-year-old and continuing until high school graduation. Paradoxically, the effects of their schooling produce the very abnormalities that parents,

and, perhaps, some well-meaning sex educators, wish to prevent."

— "Devoid of real clinical experience and, in some cases, sexual maturity, sex educators can cause severe maladjustments by undue meddling."

— "Psychoanalysis has established that the period in a child's life between ages of six and twelve is asexual; that is, a period during which sensual pleasures are normally repressed. . . . The period is well-recognized by psychiatrists throughout the world and has been designated as the 'latency period.' . . . During latency, the first stirring of compassionate feelings arises from the human mind. . . . This valuable instinct is dangerously jeopardized by sexually stimulating children in latency. Such interferences can prevent the 'capability' to feel compassion. The results can be increasingly noted in the antisocial behavior of sexually overstimulated youths."

— "In natural development, preteen children derive sexual pleasure from sensual excitements caused by sexual fantasies. Sex educators who catapult the child into a world of authoritative sexual knowledge shatter these normal fantasy satisfactions. . . . Later in life, drugs and pornography are used as adjuncts to help recapture the pleasures from thwarted childhood fantasies that had not been allowed to resolve naturally."

— "By their loyalty, normal parents teach children that sex is a one-woman/one-man affair. The sex educator's advice, 'Sex is for fun,' desecrate[s] the affectionate and monogamous nature of human sexuality."¹⁰

• William R. Coulson, noted psychologist, has said: "Society ought to be paying more attention to parental perspective right now, not waiting for the backlash. Science supports mothers and fathers in wanting their children spared the trials of sexual precocity, AIDS or not. And it supports the children in asking not to be underestimated. Self-discipline isn't beyond them, if they're told the truth. . . . The truth is summed up in six words: 'Abstinence before marriage, fidelity within it.' . . . Our children and grandchildren don't deserve to be judged sexually insatiable."¹¹

These are but three examples of a growing body of opinion that supports not only the possibility but the appropriateness of sex educa-

Talk about the rights of parents to teach a morality at home that is not systematically contradicted at school.

tion based on traditional morality. These experts, whatever their religious backgrounds, are speaking as professional educators (or therapists) who base their conclusions on scientific data as well as years of experience in their respective fields. They are distinguished by any objective standards, yet they voice the same concerns about permissive sex education that traditional-minded parents have been expressing. And there are many other educators and psychologists who share these views.

Of course, those who defend such sex education usually try to discount such authorities by saying that they are "not respectable," that "nobody takes them seriously," that "their methodology is flawed." If you are met by such a response, you can reply either by demanding that they prove such a statement right there on the spot, or by pointing out that this is precisely what *your* authorities say about *their* authorities — that no side has a monopoly on the experts. Therefore, the question must be decided on other than "scientific" grounds. At this point you can begin to talk about the rights of parents

How Parents Can Reply to School Board Arguments

School Assertions	Parents' Replies
Parents don't know enough about education to speak with any authority. Only professional educators have enough experience to make decisions on curricular matters.	While parents can't dictate teaching methods or particular textbooks, they can certainly give expert testimony on what teenagers should believe and how the wrong kind of sex education undermines family values.
All the experts agree that explicit and "non-judgmental" sex education courses are the best and most effective means of preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.	There is virtually no educational issue of any consequence on which all the experts agree; a growing number of experts support not only the possibility but the appropriateness of sex education based on traditional morality.
Anyone who opposes "explicit, non-judgmental sex education" in school is a right-wing extremist.	This assertion does not answer legitimate arguments; let's confine this discussion to the issues and avoid personal attacks.
You are the only parents who have raised any complaints about this program.	This may be true, but what does that prove? It may simply mean that other parents don't know what is going on in the classroom.

to teach a morality at home that is not systematically contradicted at school.

3. *Anyone who opposes "explicit, non-judgmental sex education" in school is a right-wing extremist.*

If you have to deal with such name-calling then you are in for a very difficult time. This kind of argument is neither fair-minded nor intelligent. Usually it reveals a loss of patience or else an inability to continue the debate on an intellectual level. Phrases like "right-wing extremist," "bigot," and "moralist" indicate no more than animosity. They don't answer legitimate arguments or counter persuasive evidence, and you must make that point to the person who tries to avoid a discussion of the issues by calling you names. You might want to point out that when people in the 1950s used similar words and phrases against liberal opponents they were called "McCarthyites." Ask politely but firmly that the discussion be confined to the issues and that everyone avoid personal attacks, not only because they are rude and uncivil but because

objection by making certain that you are not the only person present at the board meeting. You should try to persuade as many people as possible to join you in voicing their objections. In the first place, there is nothing so intimidating to members of an elected (or appointed) board as a large delegation prepared to protest board actions or school policy. Numbers suggest not only widespread concern but also a certain intensity of commitment, since it takes a lot to move people to come before a public body and express themselves.

Also, many school boards restrict each speaker to a time limit, usually three minutes; so the more people you have with you, the more time your side will have to state its case. You should definitely coordinate your presentations so that each person makes a different point, or at least makes the same point in a different way, though once your entire case is on the table, it is quite all right for succeeding speakers to say, "I just want to second what's been said," or "I don't like this program either and would like to see it removed from our schools."

If you bring enough people to the meeting and present your case in a reasonable and persuasive manner, you will make it difficult for the board to treat you with disrespect or to ignore completely the points you make.

In the final analysis, whether or not you can motivate the teacher, principal, superintendent, or school board to abandon an objectionable sex education program will probably depend on your ability to convince whoever makes the decision that the program is either severely deficient or else offensive to the sensibilities of a number of intelligent people.

It may be some consolation for you to know that a number of parents throughout the nation have been disturbed by the same kinds of materials and have been willing to voice their objections to teachers and other school authorities. While many have been disappointed in the response, more and more are reporting that they have been able to make significant changes, both at the local and at the state levels. In fact, there are several national organizations that are deeply involved in the fight for decent and traditional approaches to sex education. Among these are: Focus on the Family,¹² the American Family Association,¹³ Concerned Women of America,¹⁴ the American Life League,¹⁵ the Eagle Forum,¹⁶ and Parents Roundtable.¹⁷

If you have problems that are not covered in this brief discussion, you may want to contact one or more of these groups. They will be

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they are illogical — examples of the fallacy called "ignoring the question."

4. *You are the only parents who have raised any complaints about this program.*

Of course, it's possible that you are; but what does that prove? It may simply mean that other parents don't know what is going on in the classroom. You might want to ask the board if they have any objections to your sending a copy of the materials to all the parents in your child's class and ask them for comments. If the board says "no objections," then do it. If they say "we object," then you have a right to question their suggestion that you constitute an insignificant minority of parents.

You might also ask them if they believe the majority is always right. If they say "no," then thank them for conceding your point. If they say "yes," then ask them if they will be willing to decide the fate of this program by a vote of all concerned parents, with a majority deciding the issue.

However, it is much better to answer this

FOCUS: Condom Ed Not The Way to Fight AIDS

by Herbert Ratner, M.D.

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Dr. Herbert Ratner

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is expected to be with us for a long time. Treatment has not controlled infections or stopped deaths, and vaccines are not in sight. The highly publicized prophylactic, the condom, which has been with us throughout the twentieth century, has marked limitations. The continuous parade of new contraceptives attests to the condom's notably poor record in preventing pregnancy. If the much larger sperm can get through, so can the AIDS virus. It has a worse record in preventing sexually transmitted diseases, the incidence of which today has never been higher.

Epidemiologically, the AIDS virus' primary spread is through multiple sex partners. Each new partner sharply increases the risk of becoming infected with the AIDS virus, particularly if the partner has ever used intravenous (IV) drugs, engaged in homosexual practices or has had relations with someone who has. With the continuing spread of the virus into the public at large, the risk of a new partner having the virus becomes greater.

There is now general agreement, even among homosexuals, that abstinence or exclusive contact with an uninfected partner are the only sure protections against the AIDS virus. Today abstinence and monogamy are no longer disdainfully dismissed as religious impositions. Rather they are seen as the pragmatic answer to a pressing problem, since the condom is admittedly inadequate. It may delay but does not prevent eventual infection.

Nature did not give us a rehearsal body to be turned in when the fun is over.

At another level, there is even a growing appreciation that nature is trying to tell us something: that abstinence before marriage and monogamy thereafter are sexual norms which serve the survival needs of the human animal. Accordingly, the effective public health approach is not a nationwide push for a condomized society, starting with the very young, but a nationwide effort to curb the generation of

multiple sex partners, whose primary source comes from the sexually active young.

For, the fact is that year after year, generation after generation, millions of preteens and teenagers enter into the stormy sea of precocious and premature genital sex. And the consequences, as Kinsey researchers point out, are clear: "Once persons begin premarital coitus, they seldom recant and remain abstinent until marriage. It is a crossing of the Rubicon in life history." When the young give up abstinence, monogamy is rarely the outcome. Sex education which explicitly or implicitly condones genital sex by featuring condoms as the answer for our young people, simply accelerates the process.

Actually, the major accomplishment of the condom campaign to prevent AIDS is to impress the promoters, politicians and the public at large that something is being done; and although well-intentioned, it offers more of a placebo than a panacea.

Publicizing the condom to the four winds is, for the most part, the bravura of a puritan who is trying to prove to the world that he is not a puritan. To concentrate on the mechanical aspects of the sex act to the exclusion of the emotional and psychological aspects (which the condom campaign ignores) is the essence of Puritanism. The only difference between the new and the old is that whereas the traditional puritans were alleged to believe that sex was something to be isolated and repressed, neo-puritans accept sex as something to be isolated and exercised. Rollo May states that the new puritanism has "the same old puritan form: alienation from the body and feeling, and exploitation of the body as though it were a machine."

Furthermore, what the Greeks knew, and what today's sex educators seem to have forgotten, is that the young "have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they

show absence of self-control." (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1389a 2-1389b 11) Since this is so, it should be obvious that the message on condoms included in the Federal Government's "Understanding AIDS" brochure, which was mailed to each household in the United States, is a waste of effort and money.

Condom information is a simplistic answer to the guidance of youth. It will not convert immaturity into maturity. Formation, not information, is needed. Rather than the facts of the condom, it would have been more to the point to equip parents with the appropriate knowledge needed to educate their sons and daughters on the value of abstinence, and to supply through the parents the understanding that boys and girls need to place their energies in other directions, and that girls need to fend off opportunistic boys. Perhaps the next great advance will be made when chastity, as with abstinence and monogamy, will no longer be viewed as a religious imposition.

The basic, though long-range, answer, then, to the control of AIDS, is primary prevention. It is to get at the young before they get started on precocious and premature sex — the inexorable path to multiple sex partners and AIDS. Public health strategists in the United States Public Health Service have no difficulty with primary prevention in the case of smoking and drug misuse by getting to youth before they get started. What prevents them from doing the same in the case of AIDS? To assume that all preteens and teenagers are automatically going to become prematurely sexually active is a defeatist attitude.

Seen from another angle, our problem is that, in today's culture, fidelity is not characteristic of young love. And love without commitment is counterfeit love. Without real love, abandonment is common, and sex partners come and go with the attendant heartbreaks. This becomes part of the breakdown of young people's self esteem and the loss of self-identity.

Having multiple sex partners not only places them on the road to AIDS, but sooner or later brings in its wake a whole series of destructive social ills: not only disruption of personal growth and development, but unwanted pregnancies, abortion with its physical and psychological sequelae, sexually transmitted diseases, drugs, alcohol, suicide, and the weakening and breakdown of present and future family life.

Perhaps worst of all is the loss of the gift of fertility. To discover in later life, when the urge to have a child is so great, that one's earlier promiscuous lifestyle has rendered one sterile is a great tragedy. Those who flock to birth-control clinics early in life often find themselves at sterility clinics later in life. The younger generation needs to have impressed on it that nature gives them only one body; that it is not a rehearsal body to be turned in when the fun is

over; that it has to last a lifetime.

The problem, then, is to rescue the young from the clutches of a freedom run rampant. The condom fosters neither abstinence nor monogamy; rather it does the opposite. Those who stress condom usage only put the seal of approval on active genital sex. The message it communicates is that the condom is a good which converts irresponsible sex into responsible sex, giving it the appearance of acceptability and respectability. It is the old refrain of birth controllers which has only resulted in more and more adolescent pregnancies.

The advocates of the condom seduce our young people into deep waters from which they seldom emerge. Its intensive promotion does more to arouse and stimulate the imagination and encourage genital sex among the young than to curb unprotected sex among the promiscuous. Such promoters are in effect sorcerers' apprentices, unable to stop the flow which they have fostered. One cannot bail out the ship when the water keeps rushing in.

Concerned adults need to reexamine certain contemporary shibboleths which underlie the



promotion of the condom: that genital sex is a good at any age and in any manner; that the promotion of abstinence in sex, unlike abstinence from tobacco, alcohol and drugs, is a religious imposition that has no place in a secular society; that the poor and the underprivileged are uncontrollable in their passions, uneducable and beyond improvement. Such is an elitist position and has no place in a country that purports to be a democracy.

There is a saying that the longest way around is often the shortest way home. Perhaps if we put our energies to educating and persuading young people, boys and girls, men and women, to think "no," to say "no," and to act "no," we would get much further in curbing AIDS than by urging them to carry condoms in their purses and wallets.

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happy to give you the benefit of their experience in supporting approaches to human sexuality that are more compatible with traditional family values.

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Mr. Wright now heads the National Education/Public Sector Special Practices for Paul R. Ray & Company of Dallas. He and his wife have four grown children and five grandchildren.

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16. Eagle Forum, Box 618, Alton, IL 62002.
17. Parents Roundtable, P.O. Box 181H, Scarsdale, NY 18583.