Respect Your Elders!

Abstinence is hazardous to our nation's youth

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These days we confuse ignorance with innocence. Many adults believe (wrongly) that children are asexual, have no sexual thoughts, feelings or desires and shouldn't become aware of sex in any way before puberty. But in fact, sexual expression is coming earlier to teens, not because of loose morals or lack of values, but because children reach menses and puberty at an increasingly younger age. Yet by leaving them in the lurch rather than helping them understand the changes in their bodies, we punish our youth for what is literally beyond their control.

Few children today receive accurate, comprehensive health education at home; their mostly uninformed and anxious parents can't offer it. However, almost all children go to school, and it is there that they could most likely be prepared for a sexually healthy life. For we are losing our children and youth to disease, and it is time to act.

Consider these global statistics: In 1996, 1.5 million people, including 350,000 children and youth, died of AIDS. Of the 30 million people infected with HIV, 2.6 million-nearly one in 10-are adolescent or younger. Most new infections occur in people under 25, and about 80 percent of all adult infections occur through unprotected sexual intercourse-yet *condom* is still a naughty word in the United States.

Abstinence has been widely endorsed and heavily financed by the federal government. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) recently reported that all 50 states filed applications for their share of $50 million in federal funds for the welfare reform bill's abstinence-only education program. So while we refuse to support sexuality education, we try to legislate morals. But abstinence is a highly risky philosophy in which to put our entire trust. In his book *Solving America's Sexual Crises*, sociologist Ira Reiss puts it best when he writes, "Vows of abstinence break more easily than do condoms."

Preventing new infections in the United States by promoting abstinence alone may never be accomplished, since three-quarters of all teen pregnancies are fathered by adult males. A recent study reveals a related-and very disturbing-trend: More adolescent girls than boys are diagnosed with HIV. According to the CDC, 90 percent of the AIDS cases under age 20 are among girls. And these infections are acquired in childhood or early adolescence. These girls are generally not getting HIV from teen-age boys. In fact, many of the men responsible for infecting them are

relatives.

It has been estimated that one in three girls is sexually abused by age 18, and one in four by age 14. These preteens-who cannot “just say no”-likely feel a special sense of shame and despair when their teachers emphasize that the only appropriate method for birth control and disease prevention is abstinence. Let’s face it: Teenagers are having sex, and they need condoms.

This year, Shari Lo, a California sophomore, won a trophy at her high school science fair for a project measuring condom reliability. She was on her way to the regional science-fair competition when the school superintendent disqualified her project, explaining that “because it is on condom reliability, it encourages safe sex. Our philosophy is abstinence, not safe sex.”

It’s true-albeit rarely stated so bluntly-that as a nation, we care more about philosophy than the lives of our youth. That’s why U.S. teens have the highest rates of pregnancy, childbirth, abortion and HIV in the developed world-even though adolescent sexual activity and the age of initial sexual contact in other countries is similar to ours. Adolescents in countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Britain and France have much lower rates of STDs and HIV than our own. Why? For one thing, all other developed nations have comprehensive health and sexuality education from kindergarten to grade 12. Discussion of contraception-including condoms-is widespread in the media, and universal health care makes birth control available and affordable. Finland’s government sends out a brochure to every 16-year-old on his or her birthday that presents a positive depiction of adolescent sexuality, talks about responsibility and comes with a latex condom.

While our young are dying, we are quibbling over methods. Nationwide, one million teenage girls became pregnant last year, and half that number gave birth; three million youths got STDs. HIV infections and AIDS cases are both increasing fastest among adolescents.

Abstinence works for many of our youth. However, I’m not willing to just throw away all the rest for whom it does not work for one reason or another. We are at a low point in our nation’s history in terms of caring for our children. We’ve tried legislating morals, and that didn’t work. We’ve tried just saying no, and that didn’t work. Why don’t we try education? Let’s end this shameful era by standing up and stepping out to save our precious children.

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