

**FROM "DANGERS-OF-SEX" EDUCATION TO
JOYFUL SEX EDUCATION:
HOW BOTH LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES
GET IT WRONG.
AND HOW ADULT EDUCATION CAN HELP PARENTS GET IT
RIGHT.**

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For 40 years now, social Liberals and Conservatives have waged a culture war over sexual politics. Conservatives have fought bitterly against abortion, sex in the media, and sex education in public schools, castigating them as clear signs of moral decay. They have promoted abstinence until marriage as The Answer to everything from teen pregnancy to AIDS. With equal passion, Liberals have championed women's right to abortion, and teachers' right to discuss contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), insisting that this information is The Answer to everything from teen pregnancy to AIDS.

The views of the Liberals and Conservatives appear diametrically opposed. But based on my five years of experience in family planning and teen sex education, and subsequent 25 years as a sex counselor and journalist specializing in sexuality, I have come to believe that the two sides are not the Hatfields and McCoys. They're actually Romeo and Juliet, hailing from feuding clans, but in bed with each other.

When it comes to teen sex, the Liberals and Conservatives have very similar core values. Neither of their approaches to sex education makes sense (though the Liberal view is a tad more realistic). And neither of their programs has ever been shown to accomplish anything significant.

Meanwhile, the real answer to teen sex education has been hiding in plain sight for a good 25 years. It's the power of parents. Parents are by far teens' most effective sex educators. Parents are certainly not perfect sex educators. But they're doing a better job than they did two decades ago, and a modest program of adult education could improve their abilities even more. Helping parents become better sex educators might even transcend the supposed Liberal-Conservative divide, and promote sexual responsibility to adolescents based on a concept completely foreign to both sides, the simple, elegant fact that sexual responsibility, contraception, and STI prevention lead to better, more pleasurable, more satisfying sex.

The Teen Media Environment: Sex-Drenched

Compared with adults, teens spend more of their lives focused on the media. My 15-year-old daughter does her homework on the computer, while watching TV, with music blaring, while IMing her friends, Television, movies, popular music, and advertising are soaked in sex:

* Network programs directed at teens are filled with sex and sexual allusions. In a recent episode of "Desperate Housewives," three of the four main characters engaged in sexual banter with their husbands, a mother breast-fed her five-year-old, and a gay teen kissed his boyfriend.

* Cable TV is more explicit, notably HBO's recently concluded "Sex and the City," whose career-women characters wouldn't be caught dead without a vibrator in their purses. Many scenes on "The Sopranos" take place at a topless bar, where the dancers have been shown orally gratifying the mobsters.

* Teen-oriented music is equally sex-obsessed. Five years ago, when my daughter was 10, she loved the song, "Bad Touch" by the Bloodhound Gang:

Put your hands down my pants and I bet you feel nuts.
Yes, I'm Siskel, yes I'm Ebert, and you're getting two thumbs up.
You and me baby ain't nothing but mammals,
So let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.
You show me yours, and I'll show you mine.
Then we'll do it doggie style, so we both can watch "X-Files."

* Pornography is more mainstream than ever. Every video store stocks it. You may have to be 21 to rent or buy it, but any kid can wander into the Adult section and view the almost-X-rated box covers.

* Finally, using the Internet, every imaginable type of pornography, and then some, is just a click away. Before my Web-surfing son left for college, he downloaded photos and video clips that would make Hugh Hefner's hair curl.

Does media exposure to sex spur teens to become sexual? It's debatable, but some research says yes. RAND Corp. researchers interviewed 1,792 teens, age 12 to 17 at the start of the 2004 TV season. Then the researchers analyzed the sexual content of the 2004 television season. Two-thirds of shows contained clear sexual content. At the end of that season, they interviewed the teens again. As the sexual content of the shows they watched increased, so did their likelihood of first intercourse and

[\[1\]](#)

other sexual activities.

Empty Homes. More Opportunity for Sex

In addition to unprecedented access to sex-promoting media, today's teens also have more opportunity than previous generations did to "do it." When today's parents were growing up, many of their mothers stayed home, making access to sofas and bedrooms logistically difficult. Today, however, most mothers work outside the home, and many teens spend their after-school hours with no adult in sight. Recently, I attended a party for a friend's 18-year-old daughter who was going off to

college. The subject of teen sex came up. I waxed nostalgic about the big back seat of my old '54 Plymouth. She looked at me askance: "A car? Why didn't you just go to someone's house?"

Today we have teens exposed to more media sex than ever, and with more opportunity than ever to let their hormones get the better of them. No wonder the adult world is so nervous about teen sexuality. And no wonder both Liberal and Conservative groups (who want funding for their programs) scream [\[2\]](#) in unison that among all industrialized nations, the U.S. has the highest teen birth rate.

Surprise: Teens Are Sexually Conservative

Oddly, however, despite raging hormones, a sex-soaked culture, and empty homes after school, over the past 15 years, American teens have become significantly more sexually conservative. In addition, when they have sex, they are more likely than ever to use contraception:

* In 1991, 54.1 percent of teens reported having had intercourse. In 2003, it was down significantly to [\[3\]](#) 46.7 percent.

* In 1991, 37.5 percent of teens said they were sexually active, meaning they'd had intercourse during [\[4\]](#) the previous three months. In 2003, that figure was down to 34.3 percent.

* In 1991, 46.2 percent of teens said the last time they had intercourse, they'd used a condom. In [\[5\]](#) 2003, condom use jumped to 63.0 percent.

* From 1991 to 2003, the teen birth rate has fallen a whopping 33 percent. [\[6\]](#)

* From 1988 through 2004, the Chlamydia rate among teens has fallen 40 percent. [\[7\]](#) (Chlamydia is the most prevalent STI.)

Now, Conservatives—and many Liberals—feel uncomfortable with *any* teen sexual activity. But the trend lines for the past 15 years clearly argue against any developing "crisis." If there ever was a crisis, it has subsided considerably. Today's teens are more sexually conservative than most adults believe, more conservative than many of their *parents* were at their age.

Do Conservatives Deserve The Credit?

Conservatives have been quick to claim credit for the steady, 15-year decline in teen sex. They say their program—abstinence until marriage—is paying off.

There is no doubt that during the past decade, the nation's sex education programs have been reshaped by the Conservatives. During the 1990s, U.S. school sex ed programs turned decisively away from "comprehensive" instruction, which includes contraceptives and STD prevention, and

toward just one approach, abstinence until marriage. One survey of 3,754 sex education teachers in grades 7 to 12 showed that in 1988 just 2 percent of school sex education programs taught abstinence-only. By 1999, the figure had increased almost twelve-fold to 23 percent. Moreover, sex education programs that do not insist on abstinence increasingly promote it: In 1988, 25 percent of teachers said [\[8\]](#) abstinence was their "most important" message. By 1999, the figure had risen to 41 percent.

The rise of abstinence-only sex education has certainly been *associated* with the decline in teen sex. But Conservatives say that it was the *cause*. In fact, there is no evidence to show a cause-and-effect relationship.

Abstinence promotion began in earnest in 1998 with \$50 million a year authorized in the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Act. [\[9\]](#) But teen STI rates have declined steadily since 1988, *ten years before* the start of the abstinence push. The teen birth rate began falling in 1991, *seven years before* federal funding for abstinence education began, back when only a tiny fraction of sex ed programs preached the Conservative message.

In addition, considerable evidence shows that abstinence-only programs don't work. Abstinence-only sex ed is most deeply entrenched in the South, and notably less popular in the rest of the country. Guess where teens are most likely to become pregnant—in the South. According to the CDC, teen birth rates in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina are two to three times those in Vermont, New York, and Michigan. [\[10\]](#)

Controlled trials also fail to show any benefit from abstinence-only sex education. In one study in New York City, 312 middle schoolers were surveyed about their attitudes toward teen sex. Then for four months, 125 of them participated in a daily, small-group, 45-minute class that promoted abstinence. At the start of the study, there were no differences among the students in sexual attitudes or experience. But by the end of the course, significant differences emerged: Compared with students who did not take the class, those who did were more likely to disapprove of teen sex—apparent support for Conservative claims. However, one year later, those who took the class were *just as likely* to have [\[11\]](#) become sexually active, and just as likely to have become involved in a pregnancy.

Conservatives don't like to discuss this study, or several others that have come to the same [\[12\]](#) conclusion. They prefer to focus on a 2001 survey of 6,800 teens at 141 high schools by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Researchers from the Heritage Foundation, a Conservative think tank, analyzed the data and found that compared with teens who did not take virginity pledges—vows to remain virgin until marriage—those who did delayed first [\[13\]](#) intercourse an average of 18 months.

Not so fast. The Heritage researchers never attempted to publish their findings, so they were never subjected to peer review. In 2005, researchers at Columbia and Yale independently re-analyzed the NICHD data and discovered serious statistical flaws in the Heritage analysis that invalidated their [\[14\]](#) findings.

Meanwhile, in 2004, the CDC's National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey of 12,000 teens, showed that among teens who signed virginity pledges, only 12% lived up to them. More than three-quarters—88%—did not. And compared with those who did not sign the pledges, those who [\[15\]](#) did developed sexually transmitted infections at the same rate.

Finally, in 2002 researchers at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, analyzed 26 studies of various approaches to reducing unintended teen pregnancies, both abstinence-only and more Liberal programs. The abstinence-only programs did *not* delay first intercourse in either boys or girls. Compared with the number of teen pregnancies before the programs were presented, after four [\[16\]](#) abstinence-only programs, the number of pregnancies *increased*.

Politically, Conservatives have been very successful turning the nation's school sex education programs toward abstinence-only. But as a formula for minimizing teen sex, pregnancy, and STIs, the Conservative program is a bust. It just doesn't work.

Do Liberals Deserve the Credit?

What about the Liberal approach, comprehensive sex education that includes birth control methods and STI prevention? As it happens, San Francisco, where I live, has one of the nation's most comprehensive sex education programs. It runs from grades 5 through 8, and includes puberty issues, all the contraceptive methods, and STI prevention—with a major emphasis on prevention of AIDS, which, since 1981, has killed 18,000 San Franciscans.

In addition, at my kids' public middle school, the sex ed program culminated in the 8th grade with a visit from two 19-year-old women who'd had babies at 17. As part of a local program called the TeenAge Parenting Project (TAPP), these moms earn money by visiting schools, and discussing contraception and how parenthood has changed their lives. My kids had different opinions of the TAPP women. They made a big impression on my son, now 19. Six months after their visit, he still vividly recalled their regret over having become parents so young, their inability to afford cars or apartments of their own, and their need to work to support their children, which has meant going to college at night, and taking only one course per term. "They won't graduate for 12 years," he explained at age 12. "That's as long as I've been alive." Four years later, my daughter took a dimmer view of the TAPP women: "The teen moms were stupid. If you get pregnant in high school, you're stupid." My daughter's evaluation was harsh, but she got the point. This is about as hard-hitting as Liberal comprehensive sex education ever gets.

Personally, I'm all for school sex ed that includes contraception and STI prevention. During my years in family planning, I was a guest speaker at many schools. But do these programs accomplish anything? They do not. The McMaster University analysis of 26 outcome studies included many Liberal programs. Like the abstinence-only initiatives, Liberal sex education did not delay first intercourse in either boys or girls. It did not improve use of contraceptives. And it did not reduce [\[17\]](#) unintended pregnancies.

Recently Susan Dominus, an editor at Nerve.com, an Internet sex-and-relationship site aimed at young adults, wrote an essay in the *New York Times* about sex education: "It must amaze teenagers that sex education can generate such political firestorms, given how dull it usually is. At my public high school,

we did not take it seriously. Despite the relative candor of the curriculum, I can't remember anything useful, much less sexually inspiring.” [\[18\]](#)

“Dangers-of-Sex” Education

San Francisco's sex ed program is among the nation's most comprehensive. Yet my kids' teachers—and the teen moms—talked themselves hoarse promoting abstinence. My son came home very clear that abstinence is the *only* 100 percent effective birth control method.

Nonsense. There's another method that's also 100 percent effective, not to mention very popular, always available for free—and quite enjoyable. It's non-intercourse lovemaking, namely, genital hand massage and oral sex. But even the most Liberal, most comprehensive sex education classes *never* mention them. To mention them would violate the fundamental axiom of American sex education, the core value that unites the Liberals and Conservatives far more than anything divides them, namely, that for teens, sex is *dangerous*. We don't have “sex education” in this country. We have “dangers-of-sex” education.

To discuss hand jobs, fellatio, and cunnilingus, sex educators would have to discuss sexual *pleasure*, which is absolutely verboten. During the Clinton Administration, Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders found out just how forbidden it is. She casually mentioned that because everyone masturbates, perhaps it should be taught to children. Faster than you could say “do it yourself,” she was fired.

Both Liberals and Conservatives agree on the dangers of sex: coercion, teen pregnancy, and STIs. They also agree that abstinence is the best defense against all of them. Then the Liberals concede that, gee, abstinence is just maybe a little unrealistic, so, kids, if you can't keep it zipped, please use contraception, particularly condoms, which prevent both pregnancy and STIs.

The Answer: Parents Willing to Talk About Sex—Often

Both Conservatives and Liberals insist that they deserve the credit for the decrease in teen sex over the past 15 years. But as we have seen, there is no compelling evidence that either approach deserves any credit. Nonetheless, there is no denying that since 1991, the teen pregnancy rate has declined 33 percent. The teen Chlamydia rate has dropped 40 percent. And teen condom use is up 17 percent. These are substantial changes. If neither the Liberal nor Conservative approaches has caused them, what has?

No one knows for certain. But I have a theory. I think *parents* deserve the credit. They have been talking more about sex with their children—and getting through to them.

Now, as the father of two teenagers, believe me, I have a great deal of difficulty believing that when parents talk, teens listen. As far as I can tell, the only time my kids listen to me is when I say: “Here's your allowance.”

Nonetheless, studies going back 25 years show that when parents discuss sex and their own sexual values openly and frankly, teens listen and take what they hear to heart. They delay becoming sexual active, and, when they do, they are much more likely to use condoms. Here is a sampling of recent reports:

* University of Pennsylvania researchers surveyed 219 inner-city girls, aged 12 to 19. Those who reported the most conversations with their mothers about sex were the least likely to have intercourse, particularly unprotected intercourse. [\[19\]](#)

* As part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota researchers interviewed 2,006 boys and girls, aged 14 and 15, who said they were virgins. In subsequent interviews, the teens least likely to have intercourse were the ones who said they had “frequent communication” with their mothers about sex. [\[20\]](#)

* At Northridge State University in California, researchers videotaped many interactions among 55 Latino mothers and their teenaged children, then coded the conversations for content that involved sex and sexual values. As mothers’ discussion of sex increased—notably disclosures about their own dating and sexual experiences—their children were less likely to become sexually active. [\[21\]](#)

* Researchers at the State University of New York, at Albany, interviewed 10,000 students in grades 7 to 11 twice, one year apart, about sex discussions with their mothers. Students expressing the greatest satisfaction with these discussions were less likely to have intercourse. If they did, they were more likely to use contraception, and less likely to become involved in a pregnancy. [\[22\]](#)

* Finally, the most compelling evidence of the power of parents comes from a 1998 CDC survey of 372 sexually active teens around the country. Compared with those whose mothers did not discuss the necessity of using condoms, the teens whose moms did were *three times* more likely to use them during their first sexual experiences and *20 times* more likely to use condoms subsequently. [\[23\]](#) These differences are large enough to account for the substantial drop in teen pregnancy and STIs, and the significant increase in teen condom use.

Sex educators of all political stripes moan that many parents have trouble discussing sex with their children or refuse to do so, and that if they do discuss sex, they’re often misinformed. Hence the major push for sex education in schools. Clearly, some parents can’t or won’t discuss sex, and many who do are not particularly well-informed or articulate. But I contend that to be effective sex educators, parents don’t have to be eloquent. They just have to *try*—even if it involves admitting their own discomfort with the subject.

Parents of teens are trying. They are discussing sex more than their own parents did—even if they don’t want to. Events have forced the subject on them. During the 1960s, when I was a teenager, the news media were virtually devoid of sex news. Today, it’s difficult to avoid sex news: abortion, Viagra, AIDS, other STIs, breast implants, gay marriage, sex toys, sex offenders, pornography, sex-change surgery, and on and on. Even if parents don’t want to discuss these things, sex subjects keep coming up, and they wind up discussing them with their kids.

While the Conservatives and Liberals continue to clash over the content of sex education—mostly how much to emphasize abstinence—a survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that most American parents want their children to receive *more* sex education than even the most comprehensive Liberal programs provide. The Kaiser survey of 4,000 parents and students found that in addition to

information about STIs (supported by fully 98 percent of parents) and contraceptives (90 percent), 97 percent of parents wanted instruction on how to talk with teens about sex, 88 percent wanted teens to learn to negotiate safe sex with partners, 79 percent wanted more information on abortion, and 76

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percent wanted discussion of homosexuality.

The Kaiser survey strongly suggests that American parents are much less conservative than the Conservatives say they are, and much less conservative than Liberals and sexuality professionals fear.

Currently, chances are slim to none that sex education will ever provide what the parents in the Kaiser survey requested. If that's what parents want their kids to learn, they have to teach it themselves.

Welcome to Sex Ed Class—For Parents

School sex education programs have focused on the wrong group. Schools should offer classes *to parents* to help them discuss sex with their children. Conservatives have long argued that sex education belongs in the home. They're right, not just because parents control the message, but because unlike lame school-sponsored programs, home-based sex education actually gets through to teens.

Could such an idea work? The research is scant, but one recent study offers hope. Penn State researchers divided 50 mothers of 11- to 15-year-olds into two groups. One attended two brief classes on talking with teens about sex. Afterwards, the kids of the women who received the instruction said they felt more comfortable talking with their mothers about sex, and engaged them in more discussions

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of birth control.

But if Liberal and Conservative parents attended the same talk-to-your-teens-about-sex classes, wouldn't all hell break loose? I doubt it. In my experience as a sex educator, relatively few parents are sexually dogmatic. They often seem that way, not because they are truly doctrinaire, but because they feel confused about parenting teenagers (who doesn't?), and afraid of what "they"—peers, teachers, Conservatives, Liberals, the media, and others—might tell their kids when they're not around. Talk-to-your-teens-classes for parents eliminate the fear factor. They give parents of all political persuasions the space to wrestle with sexual issues and decide for themselves how they want to approach their teens, who might soon become sexually active—or might already be.

If I taught such a class, first I would work to reassure parents that the sky isn't falling. I would present the statistics. Today's teens are more sexually conservative *than many of their parents were*. Next, I would invite participants to reminisce about some of their sexual experiences as teens. The fact is, many parents who embrace the Conservative line in public were anything but as teens.

Finally, I would invite parents to articulate their values and practice discussing them, whatever they might be. If Conservative parents want to insist on abstinence when they talk to their kids, that's their prerogative. But personally, I would present a much different perspective—and my wife and I have in discussions with our kids.

As I interpret the research, it seems to me that whether or not teens are sexually active, they want their parents to acknowledge them as sexual beings. I believe that desire is a big reason why so many studies show that teens delay sexual initiation when their parents discuss sex with them. By talking

about it, the parents acknowledge that their kids are sexual beings. Once recognized as sexual, teens don't have to prove it to themselves by becoming sexually active before they feel ready.

One of the hardest things about parenting teens is realizing that you're no longer in control, that your adolescents are beginning to live their own lives their own way. Conservatives lay down the law and expect to be obeyed. In my view, that's unrealistic. All a parent of teens can hope to do is provide some guideposts. Here are my wife's and mine: consent, condoms, lubrication, and pleasure.

* Consent. We never want our kids sexually coerced. We've told them, especially our daughter, that if they ever feel coerced, they should extricate themselves from the situation by any means necessary, and if they need help, we'll do everything in our power to help them.

* Condoms. Pregnancy, AIDS and other STIs are real possibilities. When used properly, condoms virtually eliminate them. Condoms aren't perfect, but Conservatives have seriously over-estimated failure rates. For pregnancy prevention, depending on how carefully they are used, condoms are

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anywhere from 85 to 98 percent effective. This does *not* mean that couples can expect two to 15 pregnancies per 100 acts of condom-covered intercourse. It means that if 100 couples use condoms exclusively for one full year, somewhere between two and 15 of them can expect an accidental pregnancy. Sexual frequency varies greatly, but the landmark "Sex In America" study, a survey of a representative sample of 3,432 Americans, found that the most typical frequency was three times a

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month, or 36 times a year. So 100 couples would make love around 3600 times a year and two to 15 would experience an accidental pregnancy, a risk of somewhere between 1 in 1800 to 1 in 240.

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One in 240 is about the risk of being incarcerated. One in 1800 is about the chance that a high

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school football player will grow up to play in the Superbowl. Condoms are not perfect, but they substantially reduce risk of pregnancy and STIs. To reduce pregnancy risk further, teens can add another contraceptive method, for example, the Pill.

* Lubrication. Comfortable sex is well-lubricated sex. In addition, condoms are much less likely to fail when the vagina is well lubricated. Many women do not produce much natural vaginal lubrication, especially teenagers who are anxious about having sex. Commercial lubricants are inexpensive, and in just a few seconds, they can mean the difference between discomfort and comfort. When our son became sexually active, we gave him some lubricant. We also allowed him and his girlfriend to make love in his room, a safe place. (They also made love in the girl's bedroom, with her parents' knowledge and permission.) The relationship lasted a year. Several times, she thanked us for the lube.

* Pleasure. Erotic pleasure is one of life's greatest gifts. Every parent who has ever enjoyed deeply fulfilling lovemaking knows that the most pleasurable sex involves mutual trust and deep relaxation. Who can trust a lover who is coercive? Who can trust a lover who doesn't care about contraception? Who can relax with a lover who isn't willing to take the minimal precautions necessary to prevent STIs? Consent and safe sex are much more than just public health initiatives. Along with adequate lubrication and leisurely, playful, whole-body sensuality, they are the very basis of fulfilling sex. This country sells everything with sex. Why not use sex to sell sexual responsibility? It's one of the few places where a "sex sell" is truly appropriate.

Liberals and Conservatives both tell teens the same thing: Sex is dangerous. Don't do it. But the research clearly shows that neither the Liberal nor Conservative approaches have any impact on teen

sex, pregnancy, or STI rates.

My wife and I have tried to present a different message to our kids: When you feel ready to become sexually active, embrace responsible sex because it enhances pleasure.

If our message were widely promoted, I believe we would see even greater decreases in teen pregnancy and STIs. In addition, we would help our children grow up to be something they all truly want to be—good lovers.

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