

# 'Condom Nation'

O.K., the blush is gone, along with petticoats, high-top shoes, and whalebone corsets. Sexual frankness arrived with the sexual revolution and sin and shame are merely relative values for men, women, boys and girls.



**Suzanne Fields**

Even given the givens, however, it was doubletake time at a two-page column photograph in the New York Times, accompanying a half-page story about the nurse's office in a public

high school in New York City decorated with boxes of mint-flavored lubricated condoms labeled "ONLY for oral sex."

Elaine Sarfati, the school nurse at Hunter, a school for gifted children, says she replenishes the box with 20 or 30 flavored condoms a day, but, moralist that she is, she makes sure they're out of reach of the younger children. (But why shouldn't tots get in on the delicious experiences of school daze, too?)

The experts who push the socially redeeming value of condoms in assorted flavors insist they are necessary to fight AIDS. Lots of children think sex is safe when it's only oral sex, and must be taught that they need condoms for that, too.

And we're worried about porn on the Internet?

"This is the first generation for whom AIDS has been part of their life from the moment they were old enough to start school," says Debra Haffner, president of SIECUS, an organization that promotes sex education. "Most of them start hearing about sex abuse in preschool, getting told that sex is something a

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stranger can do to hurt you. Then in third grade, they heard about AIDS, that sex can kill you. In about 10th grade, they started learning about date rape, that even someone you thought was nice can use sex to hurt you. It has to add up to some pretty scary attitudes."

Flavored condoms ought to fix all that, all right.

Forget for a moment that the assumption here is to fight disease. Isn't this a sexist issue? Who's getting "pleasure" from what? Who is being taught to be subservient to whom? Where are Gloria Steinem and NOW now?

Naturally, there's an expert pediatrician — pediatrician! — who's conducted a study, published in the American Journal of Public Health, that finds that 10 percent of Los Angeles high school students who were still virgins had engaged in oral sex, and that this was an equal opportunity pleasure for boys and girls. A girl, to be protected when she "receives" oral sex, requires the lad to use something called a "dental dam." (They're also called words not yet permitted in a family newspaper.) Must schools offer them with instructions, too?

Among sex educators the catchy phrase for oral sex and other kinds of explicit sexual experimentation short of the real thing is "outercourse." (Cute.) Outercourse refers to all the ways to get to home plate without getting up to bat.

A person who brings up "values" in this kind of sex-ed discussion is quickly labeled some kind of sexually-challenged reject. The suggestion that sex carries emotional nuances that are somewhat more complex than Ben and Jerry's mint chocolate ice cream cone provokes smirks and snorts accompanied by condescending dismissal. "What would you know?" Or "You probably think a dental dam is something you get in a periodontist's office, don't you?"

Add to this the following facts based on a survey of 17,000 girls ages three through 12 reported in

the current issue of the journal Pediatrics. American girls are reaching puberty earlier than ever before. Nearly 50 percent of black girls begin to mature sexually at 8. At least 15 percent of white girls begin to mature at that age. Menstruation usually begins sometime during the twelfth year.

Are we thinking hard enough about the best way for these girls to mature emotionally? Does anyone

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believe that boys who aren't old enough to drive a car, who can't sit still in classrooms, who forget to turn in homework, will show patience and sexual sensitivity with young girls?

Richard Panzer, an advocate for AIDS prevention who teaches about sex in terms of reserve and respect, has written a fascinating book with the clever title of "Condom Nation" in which he catalogues the failures of sex education in the schools.

He recalls the shocking story of a middle class gang of teenage boys in Lakewood, Calif., who called themselves the "Spur Posse" and competed with each other with successful "scores" in the 50s and 60s. They said they always practiced "safe sex."

One member of the posse caught the cultural incongruity perfectly: "They teach us condoms this and condoms that, but they don't teach us any rules."