



BY MARTIN HAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# What Our Kids Know About Sex: All Mechanics, No Meaning

By DEBORAH M. ROFFMAN

Recently I found myself in a classroom conversation with a group of 15- and 16-year-old girls about sex and relationships. Boggled down at one point over the question of sexual values, I said, "How about if we shift gears? Let's talk about the meaning that sex is supposed to have in people's lives. Maybe that will help us think more clearly."

"Meaning?" the girl next to me said, looking totally nonplussed. "Sex is supposed to have meaning? What do you mean by that?"

My heart sank. I knew that popular culture had undermined fundamental values, but until that moment I hadn't realized, or accepted, quite how profoundly. The sexual revolution really is over, I thought, and sex

has finally lost.

The revolution had promised to liberate not only people, but the whole issue of sex, from centuries of negativity and ignorance. Sex would finally be seen as a positive, life-enhancing part of our humanity. It didn't happen. And if the federal government thinks that sinking more money into abstinence-only education is going to improve things—just last month, the House approved extension of a \$50 million-a-year program promoting abstinence before marriage—it is sorely missing the point.

Consider that not one of the students in the group looked shocked, or even surprised, at their classmate's response. True, several quickly became engaged in thoughtful dialogue about the possible meanings of sex and professed deeply held moral values. But, clearly, the girl's assumption—that sex has no real intrinsic meaning—had been accepted as merely another point of view, one just as valid as the next.

Actually, it would be too easy, even disingenuous, to blame popular culture for the erosion of sexual val-

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# When Having Sex Was a Big Deal

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ues—now at the point where sex supposedly has nothing to do with values at all. Movies, music and fashion merely capitalize on the sexual-education vacuum that American families and schools continue to create in young people's lives. To understand our part in the "de-meaning" of sex—literally, the removal of meaning from the very idea—and to understand our own inarticulateness on the subject, we'll need to consider our recent history.

The 1960s saw unprecedented questioning of authority in all aspects of American life. Centuries-old attitudes about sex seemed suddenly too strict and outdated. Many couples began to ignore the official dictum that sexual intercourse was moral only within marriage in favor of a contextual and relationship-based ethic. A marriage license is "just a piece of paper," people said. The really important considerations were the quality of the relationship and the degree to which the couple was capable of handling maturely the responsibilities involved.

To many, this change signaled a breakdown in morality, because traditional values such as chastity and monogamy were no longer seen as absolute. What occurred,

however, was not so much a breakdown in particular values as a switch to a different way of looking at values. Sexual morality was no longer defined strictly in categorical terms, i.e., with marital intercourse viewed automatically as "right" and non-marital intercourse as "wrong." The "morality" or otherwise of a sexual act now depended not on marital status (objectively determined), but on the status of a given relationship (subjectively determined). This was an entirely new way of thinking about sex because that is precisely what was required—thinking.

Whether this shift was fundamentally a good change or a bad one, it nonetheless represented a radical departure from the past and one that we have yet to come to terms with as a culture. We have never done the collective headwork required to figure out what our new contextual, moral yardsticks should be. How are we to think—to make our subjective judgments about what is right and wrong sexually—without them?

Truthfully, what the nation experienced in the '60s was not a sexual revolution, but a sexual revolt: We tossed out the old ideas but failed to replace them with anything specific enough to make an ethic out of. Is it surprising, then, that sex is now so fre-

quently depicted as an amoral enterprise—simply another form of entertainment or recreation, deserving no moral reflection of any kind?

Thirty years after the sexual revolt, our children are paying the price for this ethical sloppiness. With the advent of HIV, we've reduced sexual morality still further to a simple issue of "safety"; ask almost any young person what the phrase "safe sex" means and he or she will say, "Using condoms." The notions of emotional safety or social safety or ethical or spiritual safety do not even come to mind.

The gradually increasing openness about HIV and sexuality in the media (a good thing) during the 1980s gave license to the entertainment and advertisement industries to push the sexual envelope as far as they could in the '90s. Those industries now use sex to sell everything from breakfast cereal to school backpacks; they market sexually provocative images, artists and clothing to children as young as 6; they flood all forms of the media with depictions of sex that are depersonalized, sensationalized, sexist and exploitive.

We have to picture our children as little Martians, plopped down in the middle of a culture that screams for their attention at every turn. Even young children receive lit-

erally thousands of messages a year about sex—some good, some bad and some very, very ugly. How can young people tell which is which unless we, the responsible adults in their lives, are standing right by them, seeing the world through their eyes and serving as vigilant cultural interpreters?

If we want our children to come to think of sex as a meaningful and value-laden part of the human condition, we'll have to complete the work of a well-intentioned but long-stalled revolution. If a situational and relationship-based ethic is what we want our children to adopt (and I hear the majority of parents I work with saying that it is), we'll have to figure out how to put real teeth in it.

We'll have to learn to articulate clearly the specific kinds of situations and relationships that we consider morally acceptable (or not), and why. We'll have to be able to spell out the specific kinds of moral values—such as honesty, caring, responsibility, privacy, respect, mutual consideration—that we expect them to bring to any sexual relationship, from first kisses to intercourse in its various forms.

And we'll have to be prepared to explain how and why morality and meaning have something to do with sexual behavior in the first place. Certainly, while most sexual

acts do not result in procreation, and many sexual acts don't even have the potential to, human sexuality is nevertheless inherently connected to the awesome powers of creation and regeneration. Sexual acts also have the potential to give great pleasure, to express unparalleled emotional and physical intimacy, and to cause great suffering. None of these things should be taken lightly, and all of them have to do with human relations and therefore with morality.

Finally, we'll need to make clear how sex, meaning and intimacy come together. How many of us came home on 9/11 and said to our spouses or partners, "Please hold me" or "Please make love to me"? That's because in fundamental ways sex doubles as the adolescent and adult version of the cuddling that gave us such comfort as children. The human need for physical connectedness is primal, and the power of touch to make us feel instantaneously loved, protected and treasured is nothing short of magical. When that connectedness finds expression in a loving sexual embrace, the full human capacity for intimacy can be realized on all possible levels.

To think of sex as something bereft of meaning is to cheat oneself of one's humanity. We can't let that happen for a whole generation of our children.