

Sex education's worth depends on how you look at it

Experts divided on goals, figures

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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Is sex education failing children?

If, as some contend, sex education is intended to delay teens' introduction to sexual intercourse and combat pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, the answer is yes.

"As it's typically taught, sex education has little effect on teenagers' decisions to engage in or postpone sex," Barbara Dafoe Whitehead wrote in this month's issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. "Nor... do knowledge-based sex-education programs significantly reduce teen-age pregnancy."

But if sex education's goals are more liberal — improving teens' understanding about their sexuality, for instance — the 40-year-old sex-education process can be seen as having some success.

The pregnancy rate among "sexually experienced" teenagers fell 19 percent between 1972 and 1990, notes Trish Moylan Torruella, vice president for education at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

The 19 percent drop shows that teens in the last two decades have become more successful in preventing pregnancy, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), which charted the data.

Other statistics are fueling the debate about sex education's purpose, relevance and success: One million teen-age girls become pregnant each year. Some 2.5 million teens have had a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and 1 in 4 sexually active teens will contract an STD before graduation.

As the AGI reported in June, more teens are engaging in sexual intercourse at an earlier age. In 1985, 10 percent of 15-year-old girls and 27 percent of 15-year-old boys had had sexual relations. Fifteen years earlier, only 4 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys had had sexual intercourse.

In her *Atlantic Monthly* article, "The Failure of Sex Education," Mrs. Whitehead, vice president of



Author Barbara Dafoe Whitehead says sex education rarely has an impact on teens' decisions.

the nonpartisan Institute for American Values, uses those figures to argue that the "technocratic" approach to sex education has not worked and that more of the same will not work any better.

Speaking last week at the Heritage Foundation, Mrs. Whitehead said "reality-based" sex-education programs are built on three "flawed" assumptions:

- Teen-agers make rational decisions about sex.
- Teen-age boys and girls "share a level playing field" when it comes to sex.
- Teen sexual problems are "health problems" and will respond to classic public health measures — for example, "a condom can become a vaccine against the risks of early teen sex."

Teen-agers, especially when it comes to sex, are impulsive, risk-taking and susceptible to "sweet feelings and sweet talk," said Mrs. Whitehead, adding that teen-aged girls clearly bear the risks and consequences of early sexual encounters.

What's more, the problem of teen-age sexual intercourse is linked to a "culture gone awry," in which motherhood is allowed to define adulthood; marriage is "gone, dead, vanished;" and the language of "commitment" has

MIXED MESSAGES

These excerpts represent the differing views on how sex education should be presented in the schools.

The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League's policy paper, "Promoting Reproductive Choices: A New Approach to Reproductive Health," says a comprehensive sex-education curriculum should:

- Encourage young people to postpone premature sexual involvement.
- Start early and provide culturally sensitive, developmentally appropriate information for all age groups from kindergarten through 12th grade.
- Define sexuality as a normal and healthy part of life.
- Prepare young people to deal with controversial issues by supplying factual information and support.
- Help develop self-esteem, personal responsibility, relationship skills and respect for self and others.
- Provide age-appropriate information on contraceptive methods, use and effectiveness.
- Provide age-appropriate information about preventive reproductive health care, including protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV.
- Furnish information on life options for teens, including education and career planning.

The Focus on the Family's "Healthy Sex Education in Your Schools: A Parent's Handbook," says a sex education curriculum has a "harmful" characteristic if it:

- Uses phrases like "wait until you are ready," "postpone sexual involvement" and "psychosocial maturity" instead of discussing a standard of "premarital abstinence."
- Offers too much information too soon and assumes that adolescents are like adults.
- Takes a pleasure-oriented view of sexual intercourse instead of presenting sex as a unifying and procreative part of marriage.
- Defines "abstinence" as nonpenetration, leaving the idea that anything else is acceptable, such as anal or oral sex or mutual masturbation.
- Advocates that sexually active teens should use contraceptives.
- Provides instruction on the kinds, methods and how-to's of contraception.
- Mentions famous people who have had sexually transmitted disease without telling the tragic consequences. Openly shows teens talking about having such a disease without embarrassment.
- Assumes that once a teen has had one sexual experience, he or she is "sexually active" and won't stop.

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been supplanted by one of "rights" and "choice," she said.

Solutions, Mrs. Whitehead says in her article, include "prettifying" the "unglamorous business of going to school, doing homework and earning respectable grades," and "uglifying" life as an unwed, teen-age parent.

The solution, countered Ms. Torruella of Planned Parenthood, is more "comprehensive sexuality education" in the nation's schools.

"I believe, as a country, we have not made the appropriate investment in sexuality education," she

said, noting a dearth of properly trained teachers and comprehensive materials.

Ms. Torruella also said it is not fair to tie sex education's successes to teen pregnancy rates. She argued that teen pregnancy is a complex problem and can't be put in a cause-effect relationship with sex education, especially when there aren't uniform programs or guidelines. "That's why we need more comprehensive sexuality education."

In an attempt to find "points of agreement" on the issue, Planned Parenthood is holding a symposium next month on sex education.

The invitation-only event will feature Ms. Torruella, Patricia Funderburk Ware of Americans for a Sound AIDS/HIV Policy and author Pamela M. Wilson.

"We want to take a more balanced look at how and what the kids should be taught," said a symposium organizer. "Children are our reality check."