

Sexperts Disagree: Is Education a Prophylactic?

By Cheryl Wetzstein

Facing a million teen pregnancies a year and seeing no abatement in sexually transmitted disease, Americans poised on either side of the 'values' fence are questioning the efficacy of sex education.

Is sex education failing children?

If sex education's goals are to improve teens' understanding about their sexuality, for instance — the process can be viewed as somewhat successful.

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, or AGI, which charted the data.

Other statistics are fueling the debate about sex education's purpose, relevance and success: One million teenage girls become pregnant each year. Some 2.5 million teens have had a sexually transmitted disease, 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.

"As it's typically taught, sex education has little effect on teenagers' decisions to engage in or postpone sex,"

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead wrote in the October issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. "Nor ... do knowledge-based sex-education programs significantly reduce teenage pregnancy."

In her article, "The Failure of Sex Education," Whitehead, vice president of the nonpartisan Institute for American Values, uses those figures to argue



Whitehead: We need to prettify school and uglify pregnancy.

that the "technocratic" approach to sex education hasn't worked and that more of the same will not work any better.

Speaking at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, Whitehead said "reality-based" sex-education programs are built on three flawed assumptions:

- Teenagers make rational decisions about sex.

- Teenage 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."

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

What's more, the problem of teenage 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 been supplanted by one of "rights" and "choice," she said.

Solutions, 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, teenage parent.

Torruella of Planned Parenthood, however, would like to see 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 says, noting a dearth of properly trained teachers and comprehensive materials.

Torruella also says it is unfair to tie sex education's successes to teen pregnancy rates. Teen pregnancy is a complex problem and can't be lumped with a cause-effect relationship with sex education, she says, 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 recently held a symposium on sex education in the U.S. Capitol. The invitation-only event featured Torruella and other experts, as well as teens from a Washington junior high school.

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