

Uncontrollable emotions, urges that defy logic, pushing, pulling and grabbing, orgasms that spring from deep inside: let's talk about sex.

Perfectly formed bodies in the prime of their youth, spewing out hormones, and all the while adults say don't touch, don't do, and don't think about sex. So, what should hormone driven youngsters do about their sexual urges?

Most teens will tell you that sex, whether they're having it or not, is something that permeates their world. Sex is subtly displayed in the shows they watch, vividly depicted in the movies they prefer, and exactly what all animals want to do in the prime of their youth (humans included). Most teens listen to music that is not only sexually explicit, but often violently so. How can we teach young people to control their desires in a way that will make them sexually responsible adults? The answer isn't Abstinence Only programs.

Starting with the Adolescent Family Life Act of 1982, conservative Christians have been able to push through an agenda that has crippled sex education in America. Now, the goal of course wasn't to do this. Most Christians, most parents in general (myself included) want teenagers to abstain from sex for logical reasons. The problem arises when you use fear—particularly fear of what will happen in the afterlife—to control one's sexual desires. Fear will never produce emotionally healthy, sexually responsible adults. We, as Americans, have to change the way we approach sex and sexuality if we want to see a change in the habits of our young people.

But, because of a fear of homosexuality, AIDS, and a strong fear that our children could not make sexually healthy choices, each president since 1996 has supported and expanded Abstinence only education. Obama is the first president in over a decade to say that we must teach our children the facts about their bodies and the options they have should they choose to be sexually active; Obama—as usual—is right on the mark.

In his book, America's War on Sex, Marty Klein agrees that Abstinence Only programs don't protect kids from disease, pregnancy, or broken hearts. That's because they aren't effective at postponing sexual involvement or at making kids safer when they do have sex...so abstinence programs don't help kids. But they do benefit adults—both emotionally and financially. "Abstinence programs help [adults] convince themselves that kids are less sexual than they really are. They get to maintain the illusion that kids aren't doing it, are going to stop doing it, or aren't going to start."

Klein hit it right on the money with his analysis. It makes us feel better as parents to say that because my child doesn't know about condom use, birth control or STI's, they won't be sexual. This is a horrible false logic that screams at us when you look at the statistics:

- In 2001, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy published a review called *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen*

*Pregnancy.* It concluded that "the evidence is not conclusive about the impact of abstinence-only programs," and that "there do not currently exist any abstinence-only programs with reasonably strong evidence that they actually delay the initiation of sex or reduce its frequency."

- In 2005, *The Journal of Adolescent Health* found that teens who pledge abstinence until marriage are more likely to have oral and anal sex than other teens who have not had intercourse.
- In 2007, a long awaited, federally mandated study that began in 1997 concluded that abstinence only programs do not keep teenagers from having sex. Neither does it increase or decrease the likelihood that if they do have sex, they will use a condom.
- Of late, many states have begun to reject federal funding for abstinence only programs, or create a hybrid version that allows for full sex education

Time and time again, these programs have been given a bad ranking by independent groups that study adolescent sexuality. So, why does congress continue to pour millions of dollars into the program every year? Klein said it, because it makes us feel better. It scares us to know that children as young as 3 masturbate, and enjoy it. It terrifies parents to know that though they don't want their teen to have sex, they can't watch them every hour of the day to make sure they're not 'doing it.' How do we approach these issues without squirming? (By the way, if you need help with this, PLEASE read the posts in sex, drugs and other elephants!)

If your child's school district is using abstinence only programs to teach sex and sexuality, beware! It's important that you ask to see what's being taught, and more importantly, how that education program addresses the mental and physical aspects of sex, situation dynamics (like, what to do if you don't want to have sex, but your boyfriend won't let up), birth control, and sex before marriage. There are many programs that flat out lie to teens.

I once had a girl tell me that she learned in her abstinence only program that sex before marriage is psychologically damaging; that's just not true. If you're 22, sexually responsible and in a committed relationship, there is nothing psychologically damaging about having sex. This discouraging attitude toward sex is imposed on society by religious claims that God demands celibacy until marriage.

If, on the other hand, you're 15 with a 19 year old boyfriend, questions arise that must be addressed: is a 15-year old mature enough to understand the emotional and physical ramifications of sexual activity? Can two 16 year olds discuss sex, and birth control without acting childish? Does a 16 year-old know where to go if-contrary to parental advice-they want to have PROTECTED sex inside a committed relationship?

The problem with abstinence only programs is that they create a very narrow viewpoint of sex and sexuality they demonize the act of sex, offer few if any alternatives, and use the fear of disease to scare teens into not having sex. The end result is a very horny teenager that feels completely guilt-ridden, and in turn makes poor sexual decisions.

And why aren't people having an honest conversation about masturbation and the positive role that it can play in a young person's life? During my growing years, masturbation was deemed dirty. During my conversations with secular parents from around the country, many parents grew up with the same pretenses. In reality, masturbation is safe, natural (i.e. normal), and releases sexual urges that might otherwise be satisfied irresponsibly.

I plan to visit this subject again in greater detail, because this post simply doesn't do it justice, but I feel it's necessary to begin a dialogue. If we want to change teen sex habits, we have to begin by remembering that teens are young adults. They have adult sexual urges, they are sexual beings. We have to help them deal with those urges responsibly- because they aren't adults yet.

We also must realize that we cannot control our teens; our job-especially at the teen level-is to give guidance. If a teen chooses to have sex, no matter what you say, why not discuss ways to have sex in a healthy manner-condoms, birth control, not in the bushes, or in the bathroom at school!

Now, I am in NO way condoning teenage sex. I am being realistic. I don't want my daughters having sex at 16; I simply think more maturity is needed. Should they disagree, I'd rather they were safe. What's the use of raising a pretty, stupid girl who will be taken advantage of?

As a high school teacher, I hear it all. Teenagers know that abstinence is the best policy, but their emotions and hormones are still in flux. Not everyone makes the decision to abstain EVEN though they know that its best; some teens will have sex no matter what. They need guidance: they need to be taught to be responsible, to not create unwanted pregnancies (that may end up in abortion), and to understand the emotional and physical ramifications of sex.

Until next time, what do you think about teens and sex?