

**POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR CHANGES IN TEENAGE SEXUAL
BEHAVIOR**

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Presented at:

TEENAGE SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND CONTRACEPTIVE USE: AN UPDATE
Sexuality and American Social Policy Seminar Series

May 1, 1998

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TEENAGE SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND CONTRACEPTIVE USE: AN UPDATE

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

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Today, I am what you might call a frequent flyer. You see, I travel extensively speaking and training in the area of teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention. For the past five years it has been difficult to fulfill the many requests I receive from a diversity of agencies ranging from local and state governments, public and private schools, colleges and universities, churches, and many community based organizations. This is rather interesting because when I first moved to Washington, DC in 1990, the requests were trickling in, mostly from a few schools, and some community based organizations. What has put me on “the most wanted list”? My topic of discussion focuses on pre-marital sexual abstinence. It is what a growing number of people want to learn more about. Have abstinence advocates like myself, and abstinence programs had any impact on the recent decline in teen sexual activity rates among 15-19 year olds? Most of us, in all modesty, believe so.

The Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services began funding abstinence programs about 15 years ago. Even if they were not the best designed, administered or evaluated programs, they performed a critical service at the time. They brought the issue of pre-marital sexual abstinence to the forefront of the debate. They were maligned, misrepresented and challenged with an unyielding force. Nevertheless, today, many of those same challengers are won over. Once critics are now using the word “abstinence” freely in their mission statements; emblazoned across their stationery; and are delivering the message of pre-marital sexual abstinence to thousands of students through abstinence education programs across the country. What caused the change? I believe it has become clear to Americans that without the foundational tenets inculcated in the abstinence approach ...sexual restraint tempered with morals and values, and a rebuilding of the two-parent family.. we will lose the battle of AIDS and babies having babies. Research conducted by Public Agenda, and published in

“Kids These Days: What American Really Think About the Next Generation,” reveals that “Americans are convinced that today’s youth face a crisis – not in their economic or physical well-being but in their values and morals.

The youth seem to agree. In another national study, youth between the ages of 14-18 years old rated sex and poor morals as the third worst influence facing them today. In the same study, they rated the decline of family, moral and social values as number one in a list of the five greatest national problems today. According to the National Survey of Family Growth, research conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, 44 percent of the participating teen girls between the ages of 15-19 who were virgins, cited that it was against their religious or moral values as the reason for not having had sex.. Couple this with other recent data and social phenomena, and we begin to see a real possibility for more than a short lived trend, but a real swing in the proverbial pendulum towards a more drastic and long lasting decrease in sexual activity rates among teens.

Let us consider the rebuilding of the two-parent family. The National Fatherhood Initiative lists a number of studies with findings that clearly reveal the disproportionate risks faced by youth growing up in homes without fathers. For example:

Daughters of single parents are 53 percent more likely to marry as teenagers, 111 percent more likely to have children as teenagers, 164 percent more likely to have a premarital birth, 92 percent more likely to dissolve their own marriages.

Even in homes with fathers, it’s not simply their presence which protects the child from early sexual activity. According to data from the Add Health project, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, connectedness with the parent, a clear message from the parent that they

disapprove of their teen being sexually active and of them using contraception, “protect teens from early sexual involvement as well as pregnancy.”

This data gives great relevance to several national movements in America, all centered around bringing loving, involved husbands and fathers back into the home. Charles Ballard, founder and president of the National Fatherhood Institute and Family Revitalization, is credited with being the “Father of the Fatherhood Movement” in America. Mr. Ballard understood the long term negative impact of the breakdown in the family on future generations of our people. Though his primary focus was on the African American family, for nearly twenty years, he labored to bring this problem for all races and ethnic groups to the center of the American agenda. His efforts bore fruit and have led to the creation of a number of other organizations, both public and private, designed to bring fathers back into the home. This is good news, because though the number of unmarried black women who gave birth fell by 5 percent between 1990 and 1994, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births to white women increased by 23 percent during that same period.

In the last two years, millions of American men attended two historic events in Washington, DC, the Million Man March and Promise Keepers. Those events did not happen overnight. They both were harvests of years of quiet, but determined planting and watering of a vision of being loving, nurturing, protective fathers and husbands the men of America knew in their hearts they could be. Their attitudes have turned dramatically to their families over the last decade. They are becoming, in more increasing numbers, the fathers who will be in the homes to help eradicate many of the risk factors, such as early sexual activity and pregnancy, for children in single parent homes. I believe this renewed focus on fatherhood has played and will continue to play a role in the decreasing teen sexual activity rates we are now seeing.

There are other ingredients in this mix. The Add Health research reports that ten percent of the boys and 15 percent of the girls among the twelve thousand seventh through twelfth grade students

participating in the study, had taken pledges to refrain from sex until marriage. They were three times less likely to be involved in sex than those teens who had not taken a pledge. Since 1992, over a million teens have signed pre-marital chastity pledge cards as a part of organizations such as True Love Waits. The signing of the first cards did not signal the beginning of this movement. The leaders had been working for years prior to that time to help teens develop positive attitudes towards pre-marital sexual abstinence. Their efforts are clearly paying off. The research bears it out. From last count, these organizations are growing leaps and bounds in their membership. Did they have any impact on the decline in teen sexual activity we are now seeing? I think it is fair to say that they did and will continue to be a major influence for many of our young people.

There is mounting evidence to prove the negative influence of certain segments of the media on the sexual behavior of our youth. Champions for the health and well-being of youth, such as Dr. C. DeLores Tucker, will help rid that threat from the lives of America's teens. Will such efforts have an affect on the continued decline in their sexual activity rates? Many of us who are joining forces with Dr. Tucker believe so.

How do we interpret the increase in contraceptive use at first intercourse by females. Some teens are also beginning to hear the message about risk reduction. Fear of AIDS and pregnancy have motivated them to be more conscientious about using contraception, primarily condoms. That is a very positive sign. If teens are sexually active, they should use risk reduction methods to minimize their chances of pregnancy and disease transmission. The concern is how do you present the risk reduction message without unduly encouraging sexual activity? The majority of programs which provide both abstinence and safer sex approaches, and appear to not encourage sexual activity while also having good abstinence outcomes, do so by carefully separating the messages. For example, Postponing Sexual Involvement used separate semesters in which to give the two messages - abstinence-only in one semester, and safer sex in the other. However, it is not clear how many, or if any of the students who were committed to abstinence, changed their commitment after the safer sex classes. During the first six sessions of Reducing The Risk,

there was a clear and repeated message for abstinence. The focus on contraception came later in the curriculum. Dr. Douglas Kirby found that teens in the program were more likely to abstain from sexual activity, but those who were sexually active were not more likely to use contraception. A Denmark, South Carolina program dramatically reduced the incidence of sexual activity and teen pregnancy by integrating the abstinence-only message throughout the community as well as the school. A school nurse, who was not a part of the abstinence program, was reported to have distributed contraception to some of the students. However, the vast majority of the students and adults did not participate in her activities.

Other abstinence programs, such as Best Friends in Washington, DC and Families United to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which leave contraceptive and risk reduction messages to parents, family planning clinics and other sources, have even more dramatic and positive abstinence and pregnancy prevention outcomes than those that provided the risk reduction methods to the program participants.

We know that risk reduction for sexually active teens is very important, however, as responsible adults we must make all efforts to decrease the numbers of young people who are placing themselves at risk by being sexually active at all. The vast majority of our time, resources and efforts should be used to help them make the healthiest choice, that of delaying sexual intercourse at least until they are out of their teen years, hopefully until marriage. If they have already become sexually active, then to lovingly help them to again choose to abstain before giving up on their ability to do so.

Why go to such lengths? Because the dangers are still too great. Though more consistent and correct use of condoms will indeed reduce the risk of certain STDs, there are some that condoms are not effective in preventing. The National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference Statement on Cervical Cancer, April, 1-3,1996, states that there is no evidence that condoms provide protection against Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Up to 15 percent of sexually experienced teenage girls are infected with HPV. In some studies the majority have a strain of the virus linked to cervical cancer. According to the

Medical Institute of Sexual Health, HPV is the cause of more than 90 percent of cervical pre-cancer and cancer. These facts and others that we know about the limitations of condoms to prevent disease transmission and pregnancy should motivate us to encourage adolescent abstinence even more.

The goal of helping teens acquire the ability to emotionally bond with and trust a lifetime partner, in order to develop and sustain future strong two-parent families, is seriously threatened when unmarried teens enter into a series of shallow, quick, uncommitted physical exchanges they call “making love”. Even when a condom is used there are life distresses and dangers beyond those that are physical.

In conclusion, I believe the reduction in teen sexual activity and increase in condom use at first intercourse is more than just a matter of what happens in our public schools around sexuality education. It is the result of a profound renewed national effort on a number of fronts. It began with more open and frank discussions about sexuality issues; took a number of shapes and turns as it moved closer to addressing the real problems and not merely the symptoms; and has crystallized into one which places intimacy and sexual intercourse within the context of a loving, respectful, committed, lifelong, relationship as in marriage. The abstinence education movement; the fatherhood movement; the pre-marital chastity pledge movement; the parental involvement movement; the anti-gansta rap movement are but a few of the players in a significant cultural paradigm shift in our country. They are not going away in the near future, which is good news for our children.

