

Sex Education

The more the schools emphasize it, the more teenagers get pregnant.

By Ted Byfield

You become increasingly suspicious these days that our child development authorities don't know anything about children.

Take, for instance, Statistics Canada's disclosure last week that teen-aged pregnancy rates began rising in 1987 — rising "alarmingly" was the way one news report described it. Back in 1974, we're told, there were 53.7 pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19. This rate declined steadily until 1987, when it was 41.1.

Then it began to rise again. Year by year, health officialdom dismissed each increase as a mere blip. But by 1994, when it was back to 48.8, they had to resign themselves to the fact it was steadily ascending.

The dollars-and-cents cost of this phenomenon is, of course, horrendous. Most of these teen-aged women are not married. Almost half the pregnancies are terminated by abortion. When the baby is allowed to survive the pregnancy, the mother frequently winds up on social welfare. An unusual number of the children have health problems, creating high medical costs.

So what happened in the late 1980's to bring this change about? The explanation is hardly a mystery. Those were the years when high school sex education took its great leap forward. Spurred by organizations like Planned Parenthood and horrified by the gathering spectre of AIDS, educators decided the time had come to "get real."

We have to face it, they said. Kids are going to be sexually active and there's nothing we can do about it. So we'll have to give them not only the facts of life, but also the necessities of safety and, above all, we must make those necessities easily available to them.

Thereafter, condom dispensers began appearing in high school washrooms and some sex-ed literature became scarcely distinguishable from hard-core pornography.

Now we see the results. Instead of more "safety," we get far less. "Fifteen years into HIV, this is not where we want to be," says a professor of psychology and obstetrics at the University of Western Ontario. "This is not where we had hoped to be." And somebody from the Vanier Institute for the Family tentatively suggests that the sex-ed solution maybe isn't working.

But a spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood doesn't agree. The problem, she says, is that reforms didn't go far enough. We still have too many taboos. We've got to stop "scaring children off sex," she says. How an increase in teen pregnancy demonstrates teenagers are being "scared off sex" is, of course, a point not too many will understand.

But what they may well wonder is whether some kids are being scared into sex through the approach Planned Parenthood recommended and many "advanced" school districts adopted.

The old-fashioned view of education was that youth would do whatever they thought was expected of them. That is, they may not do what you tell them. But they will do what they assume you look to their doing.

If you convey the impression you expect them to be rebellious, they will certainly be rebellious. On the other hand, if you make it clear you expect them to go out and sacrifice themselves on the battlefield, they will do that. This century has had ample evidence of both kinds of youth behaviour.

It follows that if you put condom dispensers in high school washrooms you are definitely telling the students what you expect. And they will certainly oblige, as the statistics demonstrate.

The question is, of course: If this expectation has not been made known to them, would so many of those young people have become "sexually active" at that age? When everybody's doing it, then I guess I ought to be doing it. That's the way most kids think.

I remember this statistic back in the late 1980's — that one out of three grade 11 girls was "sexually active." This was a given rationale for the new sex-ed approach.

No one in authority at the time seemed to notice the other half of that equation, notably that two of three were not active. Rather than strengthen the resolve of the two who didn't do it, we apparently converted many to the view of the one who did.

This was not very smart. So maybe it's time to get rid of the condom machines and bring back the taboos.

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