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HOW REALISTIC IS THE GOAL OF PREVENTING PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH TEENAGE SEXUAL ACTIVITY?

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Testimony to the United States Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, Education Appropriations Subcommittee, May 5, 1982.

Jorgensen (1981), in discussing how likely it might be that adolescent pregnancies could be reduced in the 1980's by educational means, noted four barriers to the efficacy of such education.

1. There might be deliberate pregnancies associated with "untenable" family situations.
2. Levels of adolescent cognitive development may be related to immature and unwise decision-making regarding sexual behavior.
3. Current "sex role structures" of adolescent couples encourage precocious sexual activity.
4. There is a lack of parental involvement in educating children about sexuality.

If these are barriers to effectively reducing adolescent pregnancies, how can they be overcome? More specifically, how might prevention programs realistically eliminate or reduce these barriers?

First of all, it may be naive to think that putting sex education in the schools is going to solve the problem. At best, public schools are a secondary influence in an adolescent's world, while the primary influences on adolescents in our country remain the family and the peer group. However, if the entire population of teenagers is to be addressed, doing so through the school system is logical, but such attempts to influence teenage behavior should link the secondary influence of the schools with the primary influence of the parents. Moreover, where possible, philosophies of the peer group which lead to self-destructive behavior among teenagers should be identified and contrasted with modes of reasoning which are more related to quality family experiences across the life span. What some regard as "typical" behavior among adolescents in our society is not necessarily wise or beneficial, and teenagers deserve to be shown that all modes of living do not have the same consequences. There are different paths they can travel, with different consequences which they themselves can choose.

It is recognized that these barriers produce the symptoms of problems (such as venereal disease, premarital pregnancies, etc.) which the adolescent family life bill hopes to alleviate. We propose that the barriers identified by Jorgensen can be eliminated most successfully by being addressed directly. If they are the source of the symptoms, our solutions should be focused on those sources. How might this be done?

Barrier 1: The negative family situation

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If some adolescents achieve pregnancy as a means of escaping conflicted relationships with their parents or as a means of finding "fulfillment" in an otherwise hostile world, then the teenager's motives for sexual involvement/pregnancy are already self-defeating. Parental involvement in family life education with their teenagers can provide parents and their adolescents with new views of conflict resolution and of inter-generational understanding. Where parents are unwilling or unavailable for involvement in family life education, education can still be beneficial to teenagers and can be conducted in a way which promotes the possibility of harmony in parent-child relationships. However, by not attending to the family dimensions of a teenager's experience, school curriculum may undermine the most powerful influence available: the parents.

Barrier 2: Inadequate cognitive development or moral reasoning skills

Levels of adolescent cognitive development may contribute to immature and unwise decision-making regarding sexual behavior. Such decision-making may not take place with an understanding of the meaning of such decisions across time or across generations. Specifically, teenagers may be unprepared cognitively to deal with philosophies which promote premature sexual activity. Thus, the very philosophies of sexual expression to which our teenagers are exposed are barriers to the solution of problems such as adolescent pregnancy.

Fortunately, adolescents are also asking questions about the meaning of such concepts as justice or honesty, and could be taught criteria by which to ponder such concepts. These same criteria could be applied by teenagers to their decision-making in educational, financial or relational contexts.

However, these discussions cannot be conducted in a moral vacuum where every available choice is presented as if it were equal to every other available choice. Such an approach would imply that there is no particular value in any value, and would obscure the very kind of knowledge the students need to make responsible value judgments. In short, prevention programs must include cognitive development and skills in moral reasoning because they are fundamental to the adolescent decision-making process.

Barrier 3: Teenage couple "sex role structures" which promote early sexual involvement

Such couples may insulate themselves from the "real world" with fantasies, while behaving in ways which

have real consequences. Such fantasies are a further expression of a failure to think maturely about behavior which can affect the future so dramatically. The consequences of immature behavior weigh most immediately and dramatically on women, and have implications for future family relationships, economic opportunities, and social and emotional development.

These couples often suffer from the egocentric thinking which is the hallmark of adolescent reasoning. One way to attack this barrier to responsible sexual decision-making is through the focus on cognitive development already noted. In addition, the differential motivations and meanings of sexual involvement for males and females should be explored.

This should include a reminder that the double standard is not dead with respect to the consequences, physically or emotionally, of sexual activity. The woman bears the greater risk and generally takes the greater responsibility regarding the consequences of sexual involvement.

Barrier 4: Lack of parental involvement in educating children about sexuality

The problem here may be less a failure to teach the fundamentals of biology and reproduction than it is a failure of parents and teenagers to communicate beliefs about what would constitute wise sexual conduct through the adolescent years. Yet curiously, a common reason given by pregnant adolescent females when asked why they did not use contraceptives indicates that they did not want their parents to know they were sexually active. This reason reveals that teenagers may not be ignorant of parental values even if they have not been explicitly discussed.

It may be that lack of knowledge--either of human biology or of parental value systems--is not generally the contributing factor in premarital pregnancies. Rather, a conflict of teenage behavior with parental values and *in spite of* biological knowledge seems to be a typical context. It is proposed, if true long-term prevention of problems of adolescent sexuality is desired, that such prevention is best achieved by exploring the meaning of such behavior, not just to the individual, but to the family across generations.

In promoting the view that we must teach about family life and not just about sexual behaviors, we underline our assumption that morality in this country rests ultimately and most clearly upon the family. And this morality involves much more than just sexual behavior; it involves honesty, integrity, justice, responsibility, etc. Hafen (1981), in an address to the National Council on Family Relations emphatically states that while:

the individual tradition is at the heart of American culture,...the fulfillment of individualism's promise of personal liberty depends, paradoxically, upon the maintenance of a set of corollary traditions that require what may seem to be the opposite of personal liberty: Submission to authority, acceptance of responsibility, and the discharge of duty.

Specifically, if we were to teach children of any age that the family implications of sexual behaviors do not matter, we teach that the family does not matter. Would

we expect a businessman to be honest in his business dealings, but not in his associations at home? Do we wish to promote the idea that a school teacher should behave justly at school, but not at home? No, we expect family behavior to be moral behavior, and that our behavior in society should reflect the best of our behavior at home--whether we are businessmen, school teachers, college professors or senators.

The family, then, is the uniquely necessary source of public virtue. It is within family life that children are taught to be willing to obey the unenforceable.

In review of this point, it may be that philosophies which affirm sexual license among teenagers are more at fault for producing the problems addressed by the adolescent pregnancy bill than lack of parental instruction. However, parental commitment to such instruction cannot be underestimated.

Thus, any prevention program, to be realistic, must utilize and foster family strengths. If we abandon this generation of teenagers by not teaching them the family dimensions of responsibility, they may then reproduce a level of moral irresponsibility in the parent of tomorrow that the parents of today have not yet imagined.

**Summary of Recommendations for
Prevention Programs Mandated by the
Adolescent Family Life Bill**

1. Parental involvement should be fundamental to any program designed to prevent the problems associated with teenage sexual activity.
2. Programs which seek to prevent problems associated with teenage sexual activity should directly address the very philosophies which promote that activity.
3. Teenage cognitive development includes concerns about moral issues and about questions such as what is justice, honesty, integrity, or responsibility. A prevention program should include an exploration of these concepts as they apply to all aspects of human conduct.
4. Irrespective of the family backgrounds from which teenagers come, they all face life decisions which have implications for their family as well as for themselves. The consequences of their decisions affect relationships in their own family across time and across generations--past, present, and future. Therefore, the family context should be the foundation of any discussion of issues related to teenage decision-making.
5. It may be naive to think that any educational program could, in and of itself, be successful in preventing the problems associated with teenage sexual activity. However, any program which invites teenagers to reason and to ponder the family meaning of their behavior addresses the fundamental issues of prevention. To abandon the family dimension in discussions of these matters in favor of the treatment of immediate symptoms is even more naive because it offers no foundation to teenagers by which they can examine the full range of logical social, emotional, physical, and family consequences of their choices.

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