

Abstinence Education in Adolescents

In January 2003, the UK Chief Medical Officer sent an update to all GPs concerning sex education, stating that '*evidence does not exist to show that abstinence approaches are effective*' [Triple Helix Spring 03; 10]. Trevor Stammers, a regular contributor to CMF on issues of Family Planning, then went on to list a whole series of studies that ought to be an embarrassment to the Chief Medical Officer. In particular he examines evidence from a study in Uganda, where in the 7 years from 1996 –2001 the percentage of 13-16 year olds having sex fell from 60% > 5% in boys, and 25% > 3% in girls following their sex education program ABC (Abstain, Be careful, or wear a Condom – very much in that order!).

Why do I mention these things? Well for two reasons – one practical and one theological.

Practically Speaking

Britain now has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Western Europe, and incidences of Sexually Transmitted Diseases are on the increase. These factors have led to a governmental commitment to halving the rate of conceptions among under 18s and to set a firmly established downward trend in the conception rates of under 16s by 2010. The question is how do they plan to do that? With recent memos like that from the CMO, it would seem that abstinence education is unlikely to be high on the agenda.

In 1995 the UK saw an 11% rise in teenage pregnancy rates on the previous year, for which the blame fell squarely at the feet of 'conservative moralists suppressing free availability of contraceptive information to teenagers' [Stammers, CMF File, Adolescent Sexuality; 1998]. However in 2002 an article was published in the Journal of Health Economics by a Dr David Paton [21:207-225], indicating that not only had family planning education (including easier access to contraception and the morning after pill) failed to deal with continually escalating teenage pregnancy rates, but also suggesting that they may have actually been a contributing factor.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the response of the Family Planning Association was to reject out-of-hand this research and the suggestion that giving young people advice is ineffective. Part of me wants to agree with the FPA. Giving advice to young people is not at all ineffective. The advice we seem to be giving is that sex is good and to be expected in teenagers – why else would school nurses need to sit in vans in playgrounds and offer free contraception and advice to pupils wanting sex. Our advice is having a great effect in *promoting* teenage sex problems.

In a Nursing Times article debating the respective value of promoting virginity amongst teenagers, Muriel O'Driscoll, a psychosexual therapist, who said that abstinence education was not the way to go, defended her position by saying that we

should 'promote and support the rights of young people to accurate, realistic information and confidential services as provided by Brook Advisory Centres'. What sort of helpful and realistic information is the Brook Advisory Centre producing? Well at the time of the original article, the BAC published a booklet especially for the under 15s entitled 'The Good Grope Guide', bearing the comment that 'nice girls feel sexy and nice girls make love. That's a fact of Life.'

- Realistic? Not if Hazel Curtis is to be believed when in looking at social statistics she comments that 'the norm for boys and girls under 16 years in the UK is to be a virgin' [Triple Helix summer 02].
- Helpful? Not if the 2001 census for England and Wales is to be trusted in reporting that 56% of the population think that underage sex is always wrong, and that only 3% think that it is positively right.

So where are we going wrong? It seems that we want to promote positive sexual health among teenagers but either have no idea how to do it, or are daunted by the implications of taking a less casual view of sex and what it might say about our own values. 56% of the population think it is always wrong for those under 16 to have sex. What percentage of the population are teaching abstinence as safe sex and upholding the value of virginity? What percentage of the population are ensuring that the sex education offered to teenagers majors more on the value of abstinence than on where to get the morning after pill without your parents finding out?

Theologically Speaking

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (ESV)

Flee from sexual immorality... You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 (NIV)

God's standards regarding sexual purity are clear and absolute. We are to flee from sexual immorality. It is hard to see how providing teenagers with contraception and telling where to get the morning after pill is encouraging them to flee. You might point out that many of these teenagers won't be Christians, to which I would want to say three things.

- Many people who become Christians in their late teens onwards bitterly regret their earlier sexual experience and take the scars of it into subsequent relationships.

- 1 Peter 2:9 reminds us that as God's people, one of our responsibilities is to proclaim God's 'excellences' into a world that doesn't know him. That means telling people who God is, what he is like, what he has done, what he will do and what his values are. It is our Christian responsibility to warn people about the misuse of sex.
- Peer pressure is widely recognised as a significant factor in teenage behaviour. A study carried out in 1998 by the department of health discovered that over 40% of teenagers cited opportunity and peer pressure as the reasons that they first had sex. Christian teenagers are also vulnerable to peer pressure, which, added to the persecution that comes with following Christ, makes them particularly vulnerable to having sex in order to fit in.

We need to provide clear leadership and teaching on this issue – for the sake of the lost, for the sake of the vulnerable and for the sake of God's glory, and that means challenging the mindset which says appropriate sex education for teenagers means helping them to use condoms and to think that sex is okay whenever you feel like it.

The world at large is lost when it comes to determining their values, as they no longer have any reference point outside themselves. That is why 56% of the population think that underage sex is always wrong, but are unable to justify it and are therefore scared of publicly teaching it.

We need to be teaching and modelling God's values. We need to be challenging such worldly mindsets in our lectures and also in our behaviour. This means that in our relationships we should be fleeing sexual immorality, not toying with the excitement and power of attraction as the world does. And this is not because we are prudish, or that somehow sex is not appropriate for Christians. Sex is very appropriate for married Christians. It is God's gift to them. Sex and things designed to incite sexual arousal are not appropriate for unmarried Christians – even if they are 'going out.' As Christians we know the power of sex, the reason for it and the proper way to enjoy it. Let this knowledge shape our behaviour and inform our conversations on this matter.

Finally a word to anyone who feels convicted because of past or present sexual sin. Because of peer pressure, sinful hearts, poor wisdom from worldly sources and sadly, poor modelling and teaching from Christian sources, there will be many who carry the burden of sexual sin. Mostly I want to point you again to Jesus' death on the cross and remind you that as Paul says in Romans 8:1 that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- If you committed your sin before you became a Christian, do you not think God knew about it when he called you to himself and graciously forgave you all things through the death of his son?

- If you committed your sin after becoming a Christian do you think that God didn't know that this was going to happen when he called you to himself and graciously forgave you all things through the death of his son?

If you still struggle to grasp the reality of God's forgiveness, read through 1 Corinthians. Remember that this letter was written to and about Christians (1:2); consider the catalogue of sins that the Corinthian Christians had been clocking up between them, and then read again what Paul says to them in 1:4-8. He reminds them that Christ is able to make and keep, even them, pure and guiltless until the coming day of judgement. What a comfort those words are. Now read Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:11 and resolve to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Questions for Discussion

- 1. What reasons might people give for not wanting to teach Abstinence as appropriate sex education?**
- 2. How can you empower teenagers to genuinely take control of their sex lives – to be able to say no, as well as to say yes?**
- 3. Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. What do you think sexual purity looks like in practice?**
- 4. Look at 1 Corinthians 6:18-20. What will it mean in practice to flee sexual immorality?**
- 5. In Romans 8:5 says that whatever we have our minds set on will be evident in the way we behave. How can our mind-set - our thoughts and value systems - edge us towards foolish sexual sin?**
- 6. In Song of Songs we see both the deep joy of sex and the warning as to the power of sex (2:3-7). In what ways does the world both cheapen sex and give it a misplaced importance?**
- 7. What issues are you likely to face by proclaiming God's values with regard to sexual expression in lectures?**
- 8. What would help you to be able to do this?**