

Findings



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Sexual Abstinence

The Education Policy Dilemma

By Michael B. Long

There is no subject that has generated more confusion among teens today than sex. Teens say it is all our friends talk about (peer pressure), it is all we see on television, it is all we see in movies and advertising, it is all our favorite groups sing about, and in so many cases our teachers are showing us how (comprehensive sex education). No wonder so many teenagers believe “everyone is doing it” and if they want to be cool and popular like “everyone else,” then they need to be doing it too.

The fact of the matter is everyone is NOT doing it. Teenagers who buy into this kind of “sexual freedom” promoted so heavily in our culture are now asking these questions: “Hey man, what is all this I am hearing about AIDs and STDs? Why are so many of my friends suffering emotionally from premarital sex? I am not ready to be a mother. I am not ready to be a father. Is there anything I can do to be ‘sexually free’ of these things?”

There is no doubt the sexual revolution of the last few decades has not only produced the greatest epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, divorce, and heartache in our society, but also the most confused and misdirected generation of teenagers ever in our schools.

The “Safe Sex” Approach

And what has been the response of many educators to this epidemic? We have got to protect these kids today and the best way to do that is to teach them how to use condoms and birth control while allowing them to make their own sexual decisions (comprehensive sex education). This response coupled with the false assumption that “hormone enraged teenagers” are going

to be sexually active anyway has led many educators to what I call a defeatist attitude in teaching. Such an attitude has caused many teachers to lower their standards and expectations to the level that teens today cannot practice sexual abstinence, therefore it is unrealistic to teach it. Their assumption has been teenagers are going to be sexually active anyway, therefore we must give them the information they need to “protect themselves” while offering them little or no direction to be completely free from serious consequences.

The Wrong Way to Teach

Imagine you are a teacher. You have a classroom of teenage students. You are getting ready to teach them sex education. Your assumption is most of them are going to be sexually active anyway. Besides, their hormones are flowing at that age. Therefore, most of them are unable to control their sexual desires. You want them to be protected from many very serious consequences. You say a few words about abstinence. You tell them it is the 100% effective method of preventing serious consequences. But you do not spend much time discussing abstinence because you believe that behavior is unrealistic.

Remember your assumption? Hormones are flowing, they are going to be sexually active anyway, they need to be protected. You spend the remainder of your instruction talking about condoms. You use props to demonstrate the proper use of condoms. You provide teens with information about other methods of birth control. You never offer any real direction concerning an expected standard of behavior because you believe it is up to teens to decide whether or not they are going to be sexually active. You are teaching from the vantage point that they will be sexually active.

Now, try to enter the mind of the misdirected teenager sitting in your

classroom. Here is what they are thinking concerning sex:

- It is all my friends talk about (peer pressure).
- It is all I see on television.
- It is all I see in the movies.
- It is all I see in commercials and advertising (sex sells).
- It is all my favorite groups are singing about.

Then, consider the number of teens exposed to difficult family situations, broken homes, drug infested neighborhoods, gangs, etc. No wonder so many teens believe the following:

- Everyone is doing it.
- I have the desire to do it.
- I want to be cool and popular like everyone else I see doing it (media exposure).
- Besides, my teacher is showing me how (comprehensive sex education).

You have asked children to make adult decisions even though they freely admit they cannot decide. You have allowed them to squander through a daily bombardment of pressures that tell them to go for it. You have created an expectation in their mind that you do not believe they can practice abstinence because your assumption has been they are going to do it anyway. So you have equipped them with a false security in knowing their teacher taught them how to protect themselves. Alas, the environment of the comprehensive sex education classroom. No wonder we have a teenage epidemic of sex in this country today.

As an abstinence educator and teacher trainer, the one thing I have learned from teens themselves concerning this non-directional, comprehensive approach to sex education is: Teens today know more about contraceptives than at any time in our

history and yet most will choose not to use them for three primary reasons: 1) The invincible teenager—that nothing is going to happen to me mentality. 2) Takes all the romance out of it. Teens would rather sex happen in the heat of the moment as opposed to stopping to use a condom, etc. 3) Any teen who chooses to use contraceptives identifies themselves as being sexually active and they do not like the identity. So I learned a long time ago, you can teach teens all you want about contraceptives and most will choose not to use them anyway.

One of the worst experiences I have ever had was talking with a 17 year old boy in Kalamazoo, Michigan who said to me, “Mr. Long, I thought I was being responsible. I thought I was being safe. I thought I was being mature. I used a condom...just like they taught me in school. Why am I a father now?”

What this teenager did not learn was the failure rates involved with condom use. He followed the instruction of his comprehensive sex education teacher who said the responsible, safe, and mature thing for him to do was to use a condom. That instruction failed him. Now he has to deal with the responsibilities of fatherhood at 17 years of age. My question to the comprehensive sex education teacher who offers this kind of instruction is, “What are you going to say to the teen who takes your advice, uses a condom, and still gets AIDS or any other STD?”

One other thing I have learned from teens is the number of them that did not realize their sexual drive was controllable or that changing their sexual behavior was any possibility at all. I am not surprised by this given all the pressures they face that encourage them to be sexually active. The media portrays teen sex drives as uncontrollable. Couple this with the lowered standards and expectations of the comprehensive sex education teacher and you have reduced teenagers to the level of mere animals in regard to sexual activity. They are confused, misguided, and searching for direction.

The Right Method

The question then rises: Is there a way in which teens can be taught to make sexual decisions that will not only completely free them from serious consequences, but give them the direction they are so desperately searching for? You bet there is. It's called directive education that allows teens to conclude by their teacher's direction that abstinence is the wisest and healthiest choice for them to make at this point in their lives. The great thing about directive education is when it is taught correctly, it works.

For example, when I was in high school, everyday when I came home from school, I got this physical urge to eat. I wanted a snack. Every time I felt this physical urge to eat, I went and immediately satisfied it with an afternoon snack. Every time I felt this physical urge and my immediate response was to go ahead and satisfy it, something negative occurred in my life. Ask any teen what happened

and they will tell you I gained weight! One day I was walking down the halls of my high school and the basketball coach came up to me and said, “Mike, looks like you are putting a few pounds on, basketball season is just around the corner, you better lose some weight.” I then made a decision. From now on, every afternoon when I come home from school I would cut out that afternoon snack. Just because I made that decision does that mean the physical urge that I feel is going to go away? Of course not. It is probably going to get stronger. But if I do not go and immediately satisfy it (out of control), it is not going to kill me. In fact, I learned ways to rechannel that physical energy in order to experience positives from it, not negatives. For me, it was to go out and shoot some basketball. As a result, not only did I lose weight, I became a better basketball player in the process. Now let us ask teens to relate this example to their sexual drive.

See, abstinence education taught in a directive way is not designed to force teenagers to suppress their sexual drive in the back of their head like it does not exist in order to avoid dangerous consequences. In fact, abstinence education encourages teens to recognize their sexual drive,

appreciate it, but understand it is controllable.

This kind of education empowers teens to rechannel physical energies in order to experience positives in their lives, not negatives. It builds character, discipline, self-esteem. It offers teens a way out (renewed virginity) of dangerous activities they may already be involved in. When it is taught on a teens level without poking a finger in their face, but appealing to their intelligence and directing them to the right conclusions, abstinence education gets the right results.

North Carolina's Legislative Mandate

That is why the NC General Assembly recognized this in 1995 implementing House Bill 834 which mandates that abstinence until marriage be the expected standard of behavior taught to any teenager taking a sex education course in NC public schools. According to the law, the primary focus of any sex education program must “include, in appropriate grades and classes, instruction that:

- a) Teaches that abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage is the expected standard for all school-age children;
- b) Presents techniques and strategies to deal with peer pressure and offers positive reinforcement;
- c) Presents reasons, skills, and strategies for remaining or becoming abstinent from sexual activity;
- d) Teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain means of avoiding out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, including Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and other associated health and emotional problems;
- e) Teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous heterosexual relationship in the context of marriage is the best lifelong means of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases, including Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS);
- f) Teaches the positive benefits of abstinence until marriage and the risks of premarital sexual activity;
- g) Provides opportunities that allow for interaction between the parent or legal guardian and the student; and
- h) Provides factually accurate biological or pathological information that is related to

the human reproductive system.”

More Than “Just Say No”

Perhaps one of the biggest fallacies many educators and health professionals have concerning abstinence education, as in House Bill 834, is that it is a “Just Say No” approach to sex education. Quite the contrary. In fact, abstinence education incorporates one of the most innovative and effective methods in teaching - directive education. We do not teach our kids that when the school bell rings, that is a signal for you to form a group in the hallway and have a discussion among yourselves as to whether or not you think it is time for you to go to class. That is the non directive approach in education that does not work. We teach them that the school bell is a signal for you to be in your classroom ready for the day’s lesson or you will suffer consequences. That is clear direction that does work.

If we want our teens to be safe and healthy in this sex crazed culture, it is imperative that parents and teachers take this directive approach in training teens how to make right decisions. The beauty of directive education is that it does not lecture teens. That is the last thing they want regarding sex education in the classroom. What directive education does do is get a teacher on a teen’s level so that the teen concludes in his or her mind over and over that “abstinence is the wisest most healthy choice for me to make at this point in my life.” In fact, the word “abstinence” or “no” is hardly ever used in directive education. Again, by the teacher’s direction, the teen concludes hundreds of times that “abstinence is the wisest and healthiest choice for me to make.” That is what makes it work!

Another fallacy of abstinence education is that it is not comprehensive. In other words, it completely disregards any instruction on contraceptives. Again, quite the contrary. In fact, contraceptives are discussed at great length in abstinence education. The

difference is they are not presented as the answer to problems or as a mixed message to teens. Teachers give the facts about contraceptives. All they do is reduce risks, but teens clearly understand the risks are still there. When we are dealing with a 100% terminal disease in AIDs, ask any

teen what odds do you want to play and that teen will tell you “zero odds.” The teacher has directed them right back to abstinence. Teens learn that if they are going to be sexually active, contraceptives will reduce the risks of dangerous consequences, but directive education greatly emphasizes the risks are still there. Therefore, contraceptives are not the answer to the problem.

Besides, there is no contraceptive in the entire world strong enough to mend a broken heart.

One final fallacy of abstinence education: We are trying to teach religion in our public schools. Again, this could not be any further from the truth. We are not teaching religion, we are teaching good health. If good health (abstinence until marriage) happens to agree with a religious tenant, that is no reason not to teach good health. There are many public institutions that use our tax dollars to feed the hungry and home the homeless. Faith, hope, and charity is a religious tenant. Does that mean we stop using public institutions and money to do that? Of course not.

What is Working?

It has been my privilege over the past 12 years to train over 17,000 teachers in 38 states how to implement directive education effectively in their classrooms. To see these teachers use this new teaching strategy with their teens and get the positive results they get has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had as a teacher. As more and more educators and health

professionals embrace the effectiveness of directive education, they create a greater link between the school and community. Parents are in support of these types of programs. In fact, in all the parent conferences I

conduct, the overwhelming response from parents is, “It is about time!”

Directive education empowers parents with tremendous opportunities to direct their teens at home. So many parents ask me, “How do I talk with my teens about sex so they will listen?” That is the beauty of the

Community Awareness Program that so many school systems are conducting now. Parents are trained in an evening session the merits of directive education. They understand exactly what will be taught in their teens’ classroom. They are given parent manuals so that they can further the discussion at home where it really needs to be in the first place. It is a beautiful link

between the school and home which creates an even greater success rate.

Federal Funding for Abstinence

The federal government recognized this in 1996 with the

enactment of the Welfare Reform Act which allocates \$250 million dollars over the next 5 years in block grants to the states (Title V federal funding) for the exclusive purpose of providing funds for abstinence until marriage curricula, video resources, and in-service training for teachers. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction received \$1.15 million for the 1997-1998 school year and distributed these funds to every educational district in the state through each district superintendent’s office. This federal money is specifically designated for “an educational or motivational program which:

- a) has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
- b) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage as the expected standard for all school age children;
- c) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
- d) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
- e) teaches that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- f) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s

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parents, and society;

- g) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and
- h) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.”

There are excellent curricula and video resources available that fully meet the state and federal mandates described earlier. Unlike so many comprehensive sex education curricula, all of these include parent manuals so that parents know exactly what is being taught in the classroom. They are:

- 1) Choosing the Best
- 2) Teen-Aid
- 3) Facing Reality
- 4) Sex Respect
- 5) Just Say No
- 6) Worth Waiting 4
- 7) Worth the Wait - Wait Training
- 8) Best Friends
- 9) RSVP
- 10) Everyone Is NOT Doing It

The beauty of these new and innovative educational resources is the cost efficiency of them. Trained teachers using these

resources along with parents reinforcing the abstinence message at home bring tremendous results at a fraction of the cost. North Carolina is currently spending approximately \$1 million of taxpayer dollars to fund 23 Pregnancy Prevention Programs, most of which advocate failed comprehensive sex education. The federal government adds \$239,261 and local matching funds of \$624,733 bring the total amount to \$1.8 million being spent in this state on mostly failed programs. (See NCFPC “Findings” paper “Teenage Pregnancy: How Do We Measure Success?”)

The North Carolina state law, the Title V federal funding for abstinence education, and the curricula and video resources available today provide a unique opportunity for teens to be directed on how to make decisions that completely eliminate devastating consequences from occurring in their lives. These mandates and resources allow teachers to offer clear direction for teens and empower parents to be directly involved in the sex education of their children. The cost to implement these programs is a drop in the bucket compared to the astronomical amount of taxpayer dollars still being spent on failed projects and programs. Abstinence until marriage education would truly be a win-win situation across the board for North Carolina. ¶

Michael B. Long is a nationally recognized health educator and abstinence until marriage education expert who has trained over 17,000 teachers in 38 states how to properly teach abstinence. He has recently produced a video series on abstinence. In the spring of 1998, he was a featured speaker at a series of eight seminars presented across North Carolina by the North Carolina Family Policy Council. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has been a public school teacher. Mike and his family live in Durham, North Carolina.

Editor's Notes:

This paper is part of a written presentation of Mike Long's seminar given to parents and teachers on directive education. Since this was a presentation, there will be no footnotes reflected for this paper. If you should have any questions or comments on the content of the paper, please direct all questions to Mike Long at 919-309-9818. This paper may be reproduced without change and in its entirety for non-commercial purpose without permission from the North Carolina Family Policy Council. Copyright © 1998. All Rights Reserved.

New Video Available **Everyone Is NOT Doing It**

We are particularly pleased that our author, Mike Long, has developed the brand new video tape series ***Everyone Is NOT Doing It*** designed specifically for Title V. In fact, Sen. Lauch Faircloth (the sponsor of Title V legislation) said, “This series will help tremendously to fill the need expressed by educators around the country for quality video resources designed to teach young people how to make healthy, responsible choices about sexuality and other high risk behaviors. This is the kind of resource I had in mind when I sponsored the legislation which created the abstinence education block grant (Title V) included in the 1996 welfare reform bill...”

Everyone Is NOT Doing It is introduced by legendary basketball coach Dean Smith with over 200 teenagers featured throughout. Coach Smith says, “I think if teens listen carefully, even take notes on what Mike Long has to say, they'll find that they'll be able to make intelligent decisions in tough situations that will make their life more full and meaningful later on.”

Parts 1, 2, and 3 are for teens (each appr. 30 mins.) and Part 4 is for teachers and parents (appr. 25 mins.). A booklet is included to open dialogue with teens after viewing each tape. A free 12 min. promo of the series is available upon request. Clips from the series may be viewed on the internet at www.mikelong.com. Mike is available to provide in-service training for teachers and parents in directive education. He is also available for middle and high school assemblies and community awareness programs for parents. For more information call Mike Long at (919) 309-9818.

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