

# Protecting the Innocent

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I must have been in first or second grade when that moment occurred. The tiny, sanitized classroom was filled with about 23 seven year-olds, each in groups with respective pals, coloring and gluing together makeshift story-books. I sat towards the back of the class chatting with some friends about what game we should play during our recess period when a curious question arose abruptly over a bottle of paste and a bucket of crayons: What is “sex”?

In the small town of Ralls, Texas—a town in which my parents were youth pastors at a local church—my friends and I had all heard the word before, probably via some older cousin or sibling who found amusement in toying with the naïve minds of the young. Whispering, so as not to draw attention to our inappropriate musings, we each gave our own insight on the forbidden subject. Collectively, we knew it involved lying down and kissing. Someone suggested that sex probably had something to do with “touching someone’s butt” as well. Naturally, we also agreed that the boy probably had to have his shirt off at some point during the mysterious act. After about 5 minutes, the teacher walked by, and our conversation ended.

Nonetheless, we were all a bit more educated that day after the open forum at the arts and crafts table.

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Sex. It’s a word that never fails to leave someone uncomfortable, whether regarding a candid conversation with a friend, health-related issues, or the dreaded “birds and the bees” talk with parents. Even in the private corners of our lives, it is not an easy topic to discuss. In recent years, however, the world of public education has garnered much attention for how many school districts across the nation have been handling the inevitable discussion of sex education in the classroom. As reported by the *Contra Costa Times*, the debate has currently come up in many Kansas school districts regarding a complete switch to an “abstinence-only” policy for sex education. “Abstinence until

marriage is the best thing for young people physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually,” explains Kathy Martin, the school board member who proposed the policy. “It’s the best thing for society as a whole, and it’s the message that schools absolutely ought to be sending” (qtd. in Tobias). Such a change would require schools to no longer speak of the use of contraceptives, unless discussing their failure rate, and to focus chiefly on the negative consequences associated with pre-marital sex. Martin seems convinced that such a method will greatly benefit our society so in need of a moral clean-up effort, one classroom at a time. Still, one can’t help but wonder just how “educational” the program could actually be as it withholds more information than it disperses to the impressionable youth of the current generation.

While the advocate groups for abstinence-based education strongly feel that this method of addressing the fragile issue with teenagers is the best way to lower the rate of teen pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases, some school officials state otherwise. “We don’t want our kids to have sex, but unfortunately the reality is that a lot of them are,” admits Sandy Hysom, a Kansas health education specialist. “Therefore, we have to give them accurate information” (qtd. in Tobias). Many adults opposed to the abstinence-only method see the curriculum as impractical, as do many students who feel they are being robbed of an accurate and proper education on the issue of sexual safety.

Yet the argument seems to extend beyond the classroom and into the home, where teens and their parents are dealing with the issues of trust and communication as well. Melanie Cox, a Texas mother in an abstinence-only school district, recognizes the issue at hand with her own kids, reasoning, “Teenagers are human beings with raging hormones. . . . Give them credit for having a brain so that they can make decisions” (qtd. in “On Rise”). As easy as it seems to accept Cox’s point of view, not all parents are willing to admit that their own teenagers *do* have hormones and *do* need more of an education on how to deal with them. Perhaps this is because ignorance is bliss for parents, and it’s much easier to assume that little Billy or sweet Susie will remain innocent forever. Judging from experience though, this assumption will not always protect children as much as parents hope it will. In the end, with no other form of direct and honest teaching, a curious youth will always find education elsewhere, be it through naughty speculation over a drawing in a Biology book or through dirty locker-room talk after gym class.

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I recall being in seventh grade when the five of us sat in my best friend's cramped bedroom, all focusing so attentively on the small TV. There was an uncomfortable presence in the air, yet no one could pull his or her eyes away from the carnal images. It was late on a Friday night, and some friends and I had stumbled upon a film with a sex scene in it. Obviously, not a one of us had ever had sex, so the film kept us deeply enthralled for the next six minutes.

There was an abundance of flesh flashing across the screen, and though I had caught a glimpse of things like this once or twice before while flipping through late-night television at home, I couldn't help but feel strange knowing that four other people were also absorbed in the scene unfolding on the grainy television. We had to keep the volume relatively low so as not to wake either of my friend's parents, but every few seconds someone would break the silence with a humorous comment in an attempt to ease the awkward tension in the room. It was clear though that we were all taking in what we could from this soft-core display of televised copulation.

I don't quite recall the mental notes I made about what I saw in my captivated state. However, I also don't recall ever receiving a "birds and the bees" talk from my parents any time before that night either.

It's safe to say I had a few questions after those six minutes.

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In the world of entertainment, it's a widely-known truth that sex sells. Possibly even more upsetting to many parents across the nation is the fact that many of the films, television shows, and music videos aimed at the teenage audience are filled with sexual situations. Movies like 2001's *American Pie* glorify the act of losing one's virginity as a great rite of passage, while making light of sex in a funny and appealing way. In the first season of the teenage television show *The O.C.*, a high school sophomore loses his virginity and is congratulated by his hip, proud father. These are the popular images presented to the members of Generation Y and, as alarming as it might seem, the media could very well be one of the greatest educators when it comes to the subject of sex, especially since more and more school districts are leaning towards an extreme "just say no" campaign.

In an interview with a CBS reporter, a high school student in Harker Heights, Texas named Gabrielle seemed honest: "I think you really have to go beyond abstinence because, yeah abstinence is the best, but it's not what everybody's doing" (qtd. in "On Rise"). The phrase "everybody's doing it" has

never carried so much weight as it has in the recent years, because when it comes down to it, a lot of teenagers are. In 2004 *USA Today* published a study that took a closer look at the sex lives of 12,000 young adults, a group that consisted of both those who had pledged abstinence through a school program and those who hadn't. It was reported that while 99% of non-pledgers do in fact have sex before marriage, a startling 88% of abstinence pledgers also engage in pre-marital sex, despite their cooperation in the program ("Study"). With such figures as these, it's disturbing that there are still adults who refuse to discuss safe sex with this generation that is clearly prone to sexual activity no matter what pledge they make.

One might argue that a school instructor can only go along with the district-approved curriculum and cannot bear full responsibility for a student's decision to have sex, protected or unprotected. That being said, it is clearly up to the parents to provide accurate information instead of placing the sexual education of their youth in the hands of the system, or—even worse—the hands of popular culture. "It's a tragedy if we withhold from these kids information about how not to get STDs or not to get pregnant," Philadelphia Family Planning Council executive director Dorothy Mann stated in dismay (qtd. in "Study"). In an era where the influential media is pushing sex to the limit and abstinence is clearly "not what everybody's doing," it is indeed unfortunate that many parents rely so heavily on a system that denies students reasonable information vital to their health. It is as if parents are saying that rather than educating their own children properly and trusting them to judge wisely, they would rather trust a complete stranger.

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I still remember my first sex-education instructor. Then again, I don't think anyone in my ninth grade class at JT Hutchinson Junior High could ever forget Ed.

Ed Ainsworth was a popular youth pastor at a local church in my hometown of Lubbock, Texas, a conservative community located on the edge of the very religious Southern region called the "Bible Belt." On the side, Ed ran his own abstinence-based program and went around to many schools teaching about relationships, love, and (the million reasons why not to have) sex. A lot of people called him "Sex Ed," a moniker I'm sure many of his supporters thought added to his "hip and relatable" persona.

On day one of his seminar, the very stylish Sex Ed had "spiked blond hair, tight black jeans and a propensity for street slang," the language still sticks in

my mind even more than his hair did that day (Connolly). Sex Ed did indeed have a way with words. “Will this condom protect your reputation?” I recall him asking as he displayed a huge Trojan Condom advertisement in our auditorium. “Go ahead and use a condom. You’ll still be known as a slut.” Ouch. Needless to say, a lot of people felt that one hit even below the Bible Belt.

Sex Ed tried to scare the pants back on to many of the wide-eyed students in my class. He showed us one toothbrush wrapped in a neat, plastic package and another that had dirty bristles and looked as if it had been used to clean the scum out of a toilet. He advised us to “keep it in our packages” or we’d suffer a fate similar to that of the second toothbrush. Simultaneously, he intimated that although he couldn’t go into any more religious detail, he still wanted us to know that “there are tons of spiritual consequences” to pre-marital sex (Connolly). He didn’t say “Hell,” but I had sat through enough youth-group sessions in my life to know how these types of discussions ended. Being citizens in a place like Lubbock, Texas, I think the few hundred other 15 year-olds in the auditorium also felt that familiar sense of dread fall over them as we all learned about how sex before marriage was a pretty bad sin. Needless to say, we were all a little more frightened for our physical *and* spiritual well-being by the end of Sex Ed’s seminar.

Four years later (and after four more of Sex Ed’s annual seminars), I stumbled upon the following information: Lubbock’s STD rates have recently been defined as “chronically high,” with 1,266 cases of chlamydia, 425 cases of gonorrhea, 6 cases of syphilis, 12 cases of HIV, and 5 cases of AIDS all reported by the end of 2005. Of these findings, 36% of all STDs in Lubbock came from people 15 to 19 years of age (“Lubbock Rates”).

I guess people didn’t take that “keep it in your package” thing seriously after all.

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With the issue of abstinence-based teaching versus the comprehensive method comes yet another disturbing argument. However, this time the fuss is not about what isn’t being said in abstinence classes, but about what is being said. It has been reported that many sex-ed instructors teaching by the abstinence curriculum have occasionally provided students with frightening, unproven facts and misleading information to get their point across. Some of these include, “HIV . . . can be spread through sweat and tears,” “half of the gay male teenagers in the United States have tested positive for the AIDS virus,” and, “women who have abortions are more prone to suicide”

("Mislead"). The dishonesty that is obviously prevalent in this debate is more startling to me than officials simply withholding information. The fact that these invalidated and shocking "facts" are being drilled into the heads of students should make us second guess the kind of communication we are having (or failing to have) with them. Not unlike Sex Ed's "terrify your child" methods of teaching, these blatant fabrications further suggest that a relationship based on lies and fear is no doubt one of the most unstable relationships.

Recently, the entertainment industry has caught onto the occasionally alarming messages abstinence programs send. *Mean Girls* features a scene in which a sex education teacher scolds, "Don't have sex 'cause you will get pregnant—and die!" Similarly, independent films like *Saved!* and *But I'm A Cheerleader* show teenagers fighting off sexual urges because they fear both literal and spiritual punishment if they acknowledge their uncontrollable hormones. With magazines like *Cosmopolitan* still celebrating the joys of a healthy sexual drive, teenagers must choose between two opposing sides. Is sex a natural and even joyful part of life, or is it something so terribly taboo that it should be feared?

In a time in our country where "terror levels" and heightened security are the norm, dealing with fear is not something new to Americans. In some subdued way, we live with fear every day, always wondering if our economy is stable, always worrying that on any major American holiday the terror alert might reach "HIGH" and we'll have to prepare for another attack. With billions of dollars spent on upping the security measures to defend our country's borders, the priorities of the American leaders are very clear: It's not only about safety. It's about keeping everything within our protected borders under control and in our own respective "packages," even if it takes fear to do it.

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Over the past five years, Congress has set aside almost \$900 million for abstinence-only sex education programs (Tobias). That being said, what does it mean for our country when, as a result of these programs, many teenagers feel that their own freedom to hear the truth about such a life-changing issue has been disregarded? On a nation-wide level, how does one defend programs that mislead and strike fear in the hearts of teens or force them to be ashamed of that which they biologically have no control over? When our own government is okay with vehemently supporting "fire and brimstone" methods to keep control over its people, I'd say that the issue becomes much bigger than

a schoolhouse debate of “don’t do it” versus “do it safely.” By using such tactics and stern teaching methods, our own government, parents, and school officials are creating a communication barrier between themselves and the youth of our country, and it’s not the protective kind.

Since the September 11th attacks, we Americans have had to compromise many of our freedoms for the sake of security. There is no doubt in my mind that our own protection is important, but where do we draw the line when it comes to sacrificing our inalienable freedom to make decisions for ourselves? When it comes to sex and the youth of the nation, there are issues at hand regarding teenage pregnancy rates and rising STD rates in even seemingly “controlled” communities that need to be recognized. Why should we worry that our own country is deceiving us by withholding information vital to our well-being in such situations? Ignoring the problems within our own borders will not make them go away, nor will shifting the blame to the media and other outside influences. Providing adequate education is a responsibility that lies on the shoulders of a government that we should be able to trust.

No matter what you believe, the truth remains that becoming sexually active is a very huge emotional, mental, and physical step in anyone’s life. As Sandy Pickert, executive director of Abstinence Education Inc. states, “If you aren’t sexually active, you aren’t exposed to risk,” and she is right (qtd. in Tobias). In reality, the message communicated by those in favor of abstinence education is very logical, if only because it involves the least amount of risk for a young person. However, sex is not something to be feared or ignored, nor is it some terrorist waiting for the chance to attack our personal borders and wipe the innocence from our nation. It’s a part of life, and no matter the laws passed or the scare-tactics implemented, it will still be important to each and every one of us at some point in our lives. The young people of the current generation are real, growing individuals who cannot be treated as “innocent” and kept ignorant forever. They and the American people as a whole have the right to know how to handle *real* life-altering situations when they arise. The sooner the government realizes that it cannot implement control over its people by sacrificing our rights, the sooner we can all fully claim the freedom that is inherently ours.

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In April of my freshman year in college, far from the Bible Belt, I attended a workshop simply entitled “Orgasms.” It was the first official sexual discussion I had attended since my experiences with Sex Ed Ainsworth, and it

was the most educational of my life. It was also the first time that I wasn't afraid of receiving looks of disapproval for openly referring to things like sex organs, condoms, and foreplay. Some people were put off by the idea of such an open forum, but those people could choose not to attend. If nothing else, I was just glad, finally, to have the choice.

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