5. No-Sex Education

From “Chastity” to “Abstinence”

There is mainstream sex ed and there is right-wing sex ed. But there is no left-wing sex education in America. Everyone calls themselves “abstinence educators.” Everyone.

—Leslie Kantor, education director, Sex Information and Education Council of America (1997)

In 1981, the freshman Alabama Republican Senator, a Baptist with the apocalyptic given name of Jeremiah, came up with a way to wrestle down teen pregnancy at the same time as vanquishing what he believed were twin moral scourges: teen sex and abortion. In place of several successful national programs that provided birth-control services and counseling to young women, Jeremiah Denton’s Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) proposed to stop teen sex by deploying nothing more than propaganda. AFLA would fund school and community programs “to promote self-discipline and other prudent approaches” to adolescent sex. Opponents quickly dubbed his innovation chastity education.

At first, the press and the public reactions were bemused. “Amazing,” commented Zonker in Garry Trudeau’s “Doonesbury,” as he and Mike Doonesbury sat on their front porch on the comics pages, contemplating what the chastity bill might mean. ID checks outside Brooke Shields movies? Government-sponsored sound trucks cruising around on Saturday nights blaring Cut that out!? “Wow,” said Zonker, stupefied by the thought.

But when Orrin Hatch, the powerful Utah Republican chair of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, signed on as AFLA’s cosponsor, the bill suddenly gained gravitas. “This benighted piece of legislation is called the ‘chastity law,’ but it is no joke,” said a New York Times editorial condemning the bill at the time.¹

No joke indeed. AFLA was the first federal law specifically written to fund sex education, and it is still on the books. It has not yet accomplished its ambitious goals of eradicating teen sex, teen pregnancy, and abortion in one swipe. But for a triumphal New Right recently installed in Washington, under its imperial president, Ronald Reagan, the new law was a major victory. For young people’s sexual autonomy and safety, though, it was a great blow—the first of a pummeling that has not yet ceased.

Over the next two decades, large, well-funded national conservative organizations with a loyal infantry of volunteers marched through school district after school district, firing at teachers and programs that informed students about their bodies and their sexual feelings, about contraception and abortion. These attacks met with only spotty resistance. Sex ed was a political backwater to begin with; hardly anyone paid attention to it. Unlike its opponents, sex ed’s champions had a couple of national organizations but no national movement, no coherent cultural-political agenda. As the sociologist Janice Irvine points out, neither feminists nor the political Left rallied to the cause; gays and lesbians joined the fray only in the 1990s, when attacks began to focus more directly and hostily on them. The most progressive and politically savvy sex educators were working outside the public schools, so they had limited sway in public policy and little direct effect on the majority of kids. At the grass roots, the visible forces against sex ed were usually minuscule, often one or two ferocious parents and their pastor. But local defenses were feebler, and the already puny garrisons of comprehensive sexuality education began to fall.

Twenty years later, the Right has all but won the sex-education wars. In 1997, the U.S. Congress committed a quarter billion dollars over five years’ time to finance more education in chastity, whose name had been replaced by the less churchy, more twelve-steppish abstinence.² As part of the omnibus “welfare reform bill,” the government’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau extended grants to the states for programs whose “exclusive purpose [is] teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining
from sexual activity." In a country where only one in ten schoolchildren receives more than forty hours of sex ed in any year, the regulations prohibit funded organizations from instructing kids about contraception or condoms except in terms of their failures. In a country where 90 percent of adults have sex before marriage and as many as 10 percent are gay or lesbian, the law underwrites one message and one message only: that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity." Nonmarital sex, educators are required to tell children, "is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." 4

At first, there was a flurry of opposition to the welfare regulations. But every state eventually took the money. In many states, the dollars went largely to curriculum developers outside schools. But over the decade, right-wing propaganda and political action had been pushing public-school sex ed steadily toward chastity. Now that push was compounded by the financial pull from Washington, and the process lurched forward. By 1999, fully a third of public school districts were using abstinence-only curricula in their classrooms. 5 Of a nationwide sample of sex-ed instructors surveyed by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 41 percent cited abstinence as the most important message they wanted to convey to their students, compared with 25 percent in 1988. In the same dozen years the number of sex-ed teachers who talked exclusively about abstinence in their classes rose elevenfold, to nearly 25 percent from only 2 percent. The study's findings suggested "steepleclines . . . in teacher support for coverage of many topics including birth control, abortion, information on obtaining contraceptive and STD services, and sexual orientation," commented one report. "Moreover, the proportion of teachers actually addressing these topics also declined." 6

Today, the embrace of abstinence appears nearly unanimous. The only thing left to debate is whether abstinence is the only thing to teach. The Planned Parenthood Federation, for decades the Right's designated agent of Satan on earth, almost immediately rolled into bed with the abstinence mongers; only a few courageous chapters, such as Greater Northern New Jersey and New York City, buck the tide. Although it has been America's flagship advocate and a valiant defender of comprehensive sexuality education since 1964, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States

also publicly pledged allegiance to abstinence. "SIECUS supports abstinence. I repeat: SIECUS supports abstinence," began a typical mid-1990s speech by then-president Debra Hafer. "But SIECUS does not support teaching young people only about abstinence." Even Advocates for Youth, perhaps the single most progressive independent sexuality educator and sex-ed proponent in the country (in 1997 it told states to reject the welfare money "four-square"), now touts abstinence along with the more liberal messages in its publications. Today comprehensive sexuality education calls itself abstinence-plus education, to distinguish itself from abstinence-only.

Parents, when asked, overwhelmingly rise in favor of sexuality education covering a wide variety of topics, including contraception and even abortion and sexual orientation. 7 But, no doubt motivated by fear of AIDS, they like abstinence too. Of a national sample of parents surveyed in 2000 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 98 percent put HIV/AIDS prevention on the list of desired topics to be taught in school, with abstinence following close behind, at 97 percent.

The idea that sex is a normative—and, heaven forfend, positive—part of adolescent life is unutterable in America's public forum. "There is mainstream sex ed and there is right-wing sex ed," said Leslie Kantor in 1997, when she was traveling the nation in her work for SIECUS. "But there is no left-wing sex education in America." She included her own organization in that characterization. Just fifteen years after Joyce Purnick's newspaper denounced the idea of chastity as antediluvian, the New York Times columnist felt compelled to insert a caveat into her critique of the new abstinence-only regulations. "Obviously," she began, "nobody from the Christian right to the liberal left objects to . . . encouraging sexual abstinence." 8

There are two problems with this consensus. First, around the globe, most people begin to engage in sexual intercourse or its equivalent homosexual intimacies during their teen years. And second, there is no evidence that lessons in abstinence, either alone or accompanied by a fuller complement of sexuality and health information, actually hold teens off from sexual intercourse for more than a matter of months.

On the one hand, it seems obvious that American adults would preach to children not to have sex. The majority of them always have. But the logic that it is necessary and good to offer abstinence
as one of several sexual "options"—the rationale given by the abstinence-plus (formerly comprehensive) educators—is more apparent than real. When asked a few years ago why her new curriculum's title now prominently featured the word *abstinence*, a progressive sex educator (who has herself worked to build a dike against the deluge of abstinence ed) said, "Because it is one way teens can choose to deal with sex." Her interlocutor, a saber-tongued sex therapist, replied, "Right. So's suicide." Abstinence education is not practical. It is ideological.

**No Sex, Please. We're Sex Educators**

Of course, Orrin Hatch and Jeremiah Denton did not invent sex education as an instrument of sex prevention. Throughout history, wrote Patricia Campbell in a historical survey of sex-education texts, "whether the tone is pompous or jazzy, the intent is always to teach [young people] the currently approved sexual behavior for their age group." And the currently approved sexual behavior for any child's age group in almost any era has been no sexual behavior at all.

"[Sex instruction] should emphasize the perils of illicit coitus, moral and physical, without which . . . the instruction would be likely to have little deterrent effect," wrote one of the "progressive" fathers of the sex instruction in 1906, laying out the goals of his discipline. By 1922, when the federal government undertook to publish its own sex-ed guide, *High Schools and Sex Education*, it practically eliminated sexuality from the courses altogether. Its accompanying medical examination forms, for instance, presumably employed to elicit some intelligence about the students' sex lives, steered clear of the subject and probed instead for such crucial information as "Do you masticate thoroughly?" Evelyn Duvall's 1950s megaseller, *Facts of Life and Love for Teenagers*, rehearsed the stifling protocols of approved teen sexual behavior for decades to come, in minute detail: "When they reach the box office, Mary steps back and looks at the display cards while John buys the tickets." But life and love for teenagers meant "dating," which emphatically did not mean sex. At the end of the evening, Mary "is careful not to linger at the door."

The founder of modern progressive sex education, Dr. Mary S. Calderone, pulled back from saying "no" but persisted in saying "wait." Addressing Vassar College's all-female class of 1964, Calderone, president of Planned Parenthood, world-renowned birth-control advocate, and soon-to-be charter president of SIECUS, neither moralized nor trafficked in fear. Yet she promised a youthful freedom and adult satisfaction that could be gained only by eschewing premarital sex. Hold off now, she told the students, and you will have "time . . . to grow up into the woman you were meant to be." The rigors of self-restraint would be repaid in more emotionally and sexually rewarding marriages, she said.13

Although her counsel seems moderate now, Calderone and her fellow sex-education advocates suffered bloodthirsty attacks from the Right, who smeared them with McCarthyist and anti-Semitic innuendo and implicated them in undermining the American way of life itself. "The struggle continues between those who believe in parental responsibility and those who seek to seize control of the thinking of America's youth," declared the deep-voiced narrator of an anti-sex-education filmstrip produced by the John Birch Society. "The future of your children and your nation is at stake."14

Calderone's disciples, who would become the founding generation of modern progressive and mainstream sex educators, were the first to hint that sex, if not always approved, was nonetheless normative teen behavior. A few were unabashed child-sexual liberationists. "Sex is a natural appetite. If you're old enough to want to have sex, you're old enough to have it," proclaimed Heidi Handman and Peter Brennan, in their 1974 *Sex Handbook: Information and Help for Minors*. Psychologist Sol Gordon produced a stack of books that were not as radical as Handman and Brennan's but also respected young people's ability to make their own decisions. In *You* (1975), Gordon answered the perennial question "Are you ready [for sex]?" with more queries: "Are you mature? Are you in love? Are you using birth control?"15

Reading these books, one is struck by the total absence of the word *abstinence*, which did not enter the popular lexicon until the early 1980s (a Lexis-Nexis search of all U.S. magazines and newspapers brought up two citations in 1980, both of which were stories about the pope). Mainstream sex ed in the 1970s was still flogging the no-sex message, but books like Gordon's also represented an important strain of liberalism regarding child sexuality.

**Chastity**

Indeed, the 1970s were a banner decade for youthful sexual autonomy, not only in the streets and rock clubs, but also in schools, clinics, and the highest courts of the land. Following *Roe v. Wade*
(1973), liberals and feminists won a steady series of court cases guaranteeing poor and teenage women's rights to birth control information and services, and Washington and the states responded by establishing major programs to provide them. This proliferation of clinics reporting to the government had an unexpected result, noted by the public-health historian Constance Nathanson: suddenly, there were mountains of data on teen sex, contraception, and pregnancy and its termination—information previously available only about the poor. The liberal family-planning establishment thought it could deploy the new data to gain support for its cause. So did the Right.

Then in 1976, some statistics dripping with propaganda potential arrived. The pro-family-planning Alan Guttmacher Institute released Eleven Million Teenagers, a report announcing a national “epidemic” of teen pregnancy. “Unwanted pregnancy is happening to our young women, not only among the poor and minority groups, but in all socioeconomic groups,” the institute's president told Congress. “If I had a daughter, I would say [it was happening] to 'our' daughters.”

This was not accurate. First of all, unwanted pregnancy, for the most part, was not happening to the daughters of demographers, doctors, and Washington bureaucrats. Now as then, more than 80 percent of America's teen mothers come from poor households. And even among these young women, there was no epidemic. Eleven million referred to the number of people under eighteen who had had intercourse at least once. Teen pregnancies actually numbered fewer than a million a year, and of those teen mothers, six in ten were legal adults, eighteen or nineteen years old. Yes, unmarried teens were having more sex in the 1970s than they'd had in the decades before. But teen motherhood had hit its twentieth-century zenith in the mid-1950s, when one in ten girls between fifteen and nineteen years of age gave birth. Since then, the rate has steadily dropped.

Still, the idea of the teen-pregnancy epidemic focused public anxiety about teenage girls' newly unfettered sex lives. Politically, it served both liberals and conservatives—the former arguing for reproductive health services and education for sexually active youths, the latter trying to rein in the services, the education, and most definitely the sex.

The 1980 national elections gave conservatives their chance. Voters returned Republican control to the Senate, a Democratic stronghold for the previous twenty-eight years, and installed Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office. The new president appointed to every office related to sex education, contraception, or abortion someone who opposed all of the above. These people provided for the anti-abortion movement a forum in government that it had never had,” said Susan Cohen, now a senior policy analyst at the Guttmacher Institute. For the reproductive-rights movement, added Bill Hamilton, then lobbying for the Planned Parenthood Federation, the 1980 elections were “a cataclysmic setback.” For comprehensive sex education, it was the beginning of the end.

A few months into the 97th Congress, Orrin Hatch honored the president's request to demolish Title X of the Public Health Services Act of 1970, which provided contraceptive services to poor and young women. What Hatch planned to do was reduce the program's appropriation by a quarter and repackage the whole thing into block grants to the states. Bundled in with rodent control and water fluoridation and without a mandate that the legislatures commit any money to reproductive services, Title X might well cease to serve its reproductive-services mandate.

Meanwhile, down the hall, the anti-abortion zealot Jeremiah Denton was chairing the subcommittee on human services of Hatch's Labor and Human Resources Committee and contemplating his role in history. With the help of some friends, including Catholic birth-control advocate Eunice Shriver, sister of Ted Kennedy, he arrived at S. 1090, the Adolescent Family Life Act. Soon, Hatch was on board, too.

AFLA was a trident: One prong promoted adoption as the “positive” alternative to unwed motherhood or abortion, although at that time 96 percent of pregnant adolescents were rejecting adoption as a cruel and unnecessary option. Another prong prohibited government funds to any agency whose workers even uttered the word abortion to a teenager, much less performed the operation. “Chastity education” was the central, most controversial prong.

But public controversy and press ridicule, from the political cartoons of small city papers to the editorial pages of the New York Times and the Washington Post, seemed barely to ruffle Capitol Hill's confident new majority. With the National Right to Life and the American Life League barnstorming in the background and the family planners distracted in the rush to save Title X, S. 1090 zipped
through the Senate. When it came up during the final budget reconciliation, California Democrat Henry Waxman, chair of the Commerce Committee's subcommittee on public health and Title X's most active defender, was forced to make a trade with Hatch and Denton. Waxman could keep Title X, but only with AFLA tied to it like a string of clattering cans.

"AFLA was the anti-abortion answer to Title X Family Planning," Judy DeSarno, president and CEO of the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, summed it up seventeen years later. At the time, she added, most of the family-planning community was relieved. Had Title X been lost, millions of poor women would have gotten no reproductive health services at all, she said. "It was unfortunate," added Cohen of the Gutmacher Institute, "but the important thing is that the real preventive program has been able to survive over the last decade-plus, and AFLA has not really hurt that program."

Others disagreed strongly with the assessment that AFLA was doing little harm. Among the detractors were the lawyers at the American Civil Liberties Union's Reproductive Freedom Project, who believed that while the legislation might not hurt Title X, it would hurt sex education—and the First Amendment. In 1983, in Kendrick v. Bowen, they argued that the sex-education portion of the law was a Trojan horse smuggling the values of the Christian Right, particularly its unbending opposition to abortion, to public-school children at public expense. AFLA, they said, was a violation of the constitutional separation of church and state.

The Supreme Court finally decided, ten years later, that AFLA was constitutional as written—"facially"—but that in practice the government was indeed promoting certain religions and discriminating against others. The bench appointed the ACLU to monitor the law's administration, which it unofficially had been doing throughout the litigation.

But, many now believe, it was too late. Some of the biggest federal grant recipients, including Sex Respect and Teen-Aid, had already turned their taxpayer-funded church-developed anti-sex-education curricula into big-for-profit businesses. Respect Inc., which received more than $1.6 million in federal and state grants during the 1980s, claimed in the early 1990s that its curricula were in use in one-quarter of American school districts. Teen-Aid, which received AFLA grants amounting to $784,683 between 1987 and 1991, became one of the major publishers of abstinence-only programs, which teach little more than "just say no."

This bankrolling—and the substitution of federal funds for contraception with dollars for chastity—was anything but surreptitious. AFLA "was written expressly for the purpose of diverting [federal] money that would otherwise go to Planned Parenthood into groups with traditional values," a Conservative Digest writer reported. "That noble purpose has certainly been fulfilled here. If it hadn't been for the seed money provided by the government, 'Sex Respect' might still be just an idea sitting in a graduate student's thesis." Said former SIECUS spokesman Daniel Daley in 1997, "In those first years of AFLA, this money went directly from the government to Christian fundamentalist groups, who built the infrastructure of the organizations that are the most vehement opponents of comprehensive sexuality education today." Also born during that time was the discourse of teen sex that shapes policy to this day.

"The problem of premarital adolescent sexual relations"

In his July 1981 committee report on S. 1090, Denton quoted the statistics promulgated by the Gutmacher Institute (he was probably unaware the organization was named for one of history's great champions of abortion rights). The senator declared that the government should address the "needs of pregnant adolescents" and proposed a prescription that the entire family-planning profession could applaud: more prevention.

But prevention of what? Poverty? Teen pregnancy? Unwed motherhood? Abortion? Denton claimed he could eradicate all of the above by preventing what he saw as the cause of them all: teen sex. In what would become the central maneuver in the conservative rhetoric of teen sexuality over the next decades, Denton collapsed four separate events—sex, pregnancy, birth, and abortion—into one "widespread problem." He attributed "serious medical, social, and economic consequences" to all four and then wrapped them into one whopper: "the problem of premarital adolescent sexual relations."

This "problem" had been exacerbated by a decade of social policy, which he and Hatch summed up in a letter to the New York Times as "$1.5 billion of taxpayers' money [spent] on 'family planning.'" Contraception and abortion, they reasoned, had led to
teen sex, which led to pregnancy. The logical sleight of hand was impressive: contraception and abortion caused teen pregnancy.

But the real trouble, as the sponsors saw it, was not just adolescent sex. It was sex behind Mom and Dad's back. "The deep pocket of government has funded this intervention between parents and their children in schools and clinics for 10 years," wrote Hatch and Denton. "It is little wonder that problems of adolescent sexual activity grow worse." In other words, clinics that offered confidential services to adolescents, as the Supreme Court had ordered in 1977, were ripping the family apart by promoting children's liberation at the expense of a newly articulated subset of family values, "parental rights." (Later, in conservative parlance, "parents" would become "families," implying a harmonious and cooperative unit without gender or generational conflict.)

For a decade, whether out of grudging realism or genuine support for the rights of young women, policymakers had gone along with the liberal family-planning establishment in regarding minor-age clients as independent actors in their own sexual lives. But by the 1980s, with AFLA inscribed as statute and political pressure rising from the Right, a time-tested theme was revived: parents should control all aspects of their kids' sexuality. "I am not opposed to family planning when we are planning families," Denton told the press. "However, unemancipated minors do not plan families." 37

Family planning had long been a euphemism for contraception, which was a trope for modern, conscious, technologically enhanced sexual activity. To family planners, prevention had meant the prevention of unplanned pregnancy. Now prevention was the prevention of sex, and it would be accomplished not by the Pill but by diatribe and ideology. AFLA installed sex education under the aegis of "family life." And in the ideal family, parents kept their children safe by denying their sexuality and their autonomy, and children could feel safe by accepting the limits of childhood.

"Abstinence" Triumphant
Sexuality was "family life." And only families—that is, heterosexual married mommies and daddies—could have sex. In 1996, the man who brought extramarital fellatio and erotic cigar play to prime-time television signed into law a provision that would fiscally excommunicate sex educators who did not hew to this credo: Section 501(b): Abstinence Education, of the Social Security Act of 1997.

To receive money from Washington, states would have to match each federal dollar with two from their own coffers that might otherwise go to more Catholic programs. Not only was the federal government encouraging abstinence-only; it was discouraging everything else.

The abstinence-only funding regulations were the platinum standard of conservative ideology about sexuality and the family. And like the AFLA-funded curricula that inspired them, their absoluteness made them easy for most Americans to dislike. So at first, a number of health and education departments balked at using their limited dollars to preach abstinence in schools where half the kids were already having sex, and some already had babies or HIV. Some youth, sex-ed, and reproductive-rights advocates (most vocally Advocates for Youth) extolled their state bureaucracies to turn down the money. But many states already had similar, if not equally restrictive, laws. Of the twenty-three requiring sex education, fewer than half prescribed lessons on contraception, and all mandated instructing on abstinence. 39

In the end, every state applied for the federal abstinence-only money in the first year, and all but two took it. 40 Five states passed laws requiring that sexuality education programs teach abstinence-only as the standard for school-age children. 41 In 2000, under the sponsorship of Oklahoma archconservative Republican representative Ernest Istook, the language of AFLA was brought into conformity with that of the welfare law, and an additional twenty million dollars were appropriated to fund AFLA's now seamless doctrinaire grant making. Organizations such as Advocates for Youth, SIECUS, and the National Coalition Against Censorship began campaigning that year to block the reappropriation of abstinence-only funding in 2001. But with George W. Bush in the White House and few Congress members willing to squander political capital opposing it, the program's healthy survival is almost assured.

In one way, the wide support for abstinence makes sense. Americans are still convinced that teen pregnancy is pandemic, and in a time of sex-borne death, containing the exchange of adolescent body fluids is an attractive notion to parents, educators, and even to kids themselves.

In another way, however, it is senseless, and for the simplest of reasons: Comprehensive, nonabstinence sex education works. And
abstinence education does not. In many European countries, where teens have as much sex as in America, sex ed starts in the earliest grades. It is informed by a no-nonsense, even enthusiastic, attitude toward the sexual; it is explicit; and it doesn’t teach abstinence. Rates of unwanted teen pregnancy, abortion, and AIDS in every Western European country are a fraction of our own; the average age of first intercourse is about the same as in the United States.43

Abstinence programs, on the other hand, do not change students’ attitudes for long, and they change behavior hardly a whit. By 1997, six studies had been published in the scientific literature showing that these classes did not accomplish their goal: to get kids to delay intercourse.44 In one case, male students enrolled in a chastity-only course actually had more sex than those in the control group.45 Following the implementation of the welfare rules, a study of 659 African American Philadelphia sixth- and seventh-graders, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, returned the same verdict. A year after the classes, the kids who had undergone an abstinence-only program were engaging in intercourse in the same numbers (about a fifth) as kids who had received lessons stressing condom use, with the dangerous difference that the first group hadn’t been taught anything about safe sex.46 “It is difficult to understand the logic behind the decision to earmark funds specifically for abstinence programs,” commented JAMA’s editors.47 A consensus statement on AIDS prevention by the National Institutes of Health delivered an even more damning indictment: abstinence-only education was potentially lethal. The “approach places policy in direct conflict with science and ignores overwhelming evidence that other programs would be effective,” concluded the group, whose members included many of the country’s top AIDS experts. “[A]bstinence-only programs cannot be justified in the face of effective programs and given the fact that we face an international emergency in the AIDS epidemic.”48

If it is difficult to understand the logic behind abstinence-only policy, it may be instructive to know that its proponents were proudly unswayed by logic. Although the law’s impetus came in part from the continuing concern over nonmarital births, the House staffers who worked on the legislation admitted, in the commentary circulated in Congress, that “there is little evidence . . . that any particular policy or program will reduce the frequency of nonmarital births.”49 Now, this is not true: any number of policies, from contraceptive education to college scholarships for women, can reduce the frequency of nonmarital teen births. But the welfare law was not really intended to reduce teen births anyway. It was intended to make a statement: “to put Congress on the side of the social tradition . . . that sex should be confined to married couples.” Like missionaries forcing the indigenous people to throw off their own gods and adopt the new dogma whole, the authors expected—indeed, seemed almost to relish—popular resistance to their ideas. “That both the practices and standards in many communities across the country clash with the standard required by the law,” they wrote, “is precisely the point.”30

Comprehensive educators, on the other hand, claim to be guided by reliable data, not ideology, or at least not conservative, antosexual ideology. So what was driving them to adopt abstinence?

Advocates were tired. They were worn down and in some cases financially broken by a decade of furious battering from the organized Christian Right, including hundreds of direct personal threats of divine retribution or its equivalent by human hands. (In one campaign, the conservative Concerned Women for America generated thirty thousand missives to Congress accusing SIECUS of supporting pedophilia and baby killing. “You will burn in the lake of fire,” was only one of thousands sent directly to SIECUS president Haffner.) Classroom teachers were under increasing surveillance, which made them more cautious. Some got rid of the anonymous question box into which students used to place embarrassing queries, knowing they’d get straight responses; now, this was too dangerously unpredictable. Some told me their principals advised sending students who asked embarrassing questions that indicated they were sexually active off to the guidance counselor for a tête-à-tête (implying that sex is not only private but also a psychological and social problem). More and more dropped discussion of the controversial subjects, such as abortion, or stopped informing students about where they could get birth control.51 In 1998 SIECUS published a handbook called Filling the Gaps: Hard to Teach Topics in Sexuality Education. The topics included safer sex, condoms, sexual orientation, diversity, pregnancy options, sexual behavior, and society, and (incongruously, but presumably because it could not be left off any list) abstinence. The “gaps,” in short, were everything but sexual plumbing and disease.

But even those who continued to teach the “gaps” pitched abstinence too, whether they believed it was worthwhile or not. “The fact is, we all have to pay homage to abstinence before we can say
anything else. Professionally, it is almost suicidal not to,” Leslie Kantor, education vice-president of Planned Parenthood of New York City, told me ruefully. “The vast majority of adolescents in America and across the globe enter into sexual relations during their teen years. This is just a fact, and to talk about anything else is simply wasting time. [Nevertheless,] if you are not seen as a supporter of abstinence... you are not likely, if you are a teacher, to keep your job, and if you’re from the outside, you won’t get into to do any sexuality education at all.”

The titles of the comprehensive curricula were white flags spelling out this surrender. “Living Smart: Understanding Sexuality,” put out by ETR Associates, the nation’s largest mainstream sex-education publisher, became “Sex Can Wait: An Abstinence-Based Sexuality Curriculum for Middle School.” Planned Parenthood’s 1986 “Positive Images: A New Approach to Contraceptive Education” was born again as “The New Positive Images: Teaching Abstinence, Contraception, and Sexual Health,” even though the content is about as scant on abstinence lessons as its predecessor. A pamphlet on birth control education published in 2000 by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy was called The Next Best Thing. The title implied that contraception was the next best thing to abstinence, which the campaign had adopted from the start as the optimal defense against unwanted pregnancy. But to a skeptical observer it might signal the campaign’s decision to champion the next-best method of sex education, because the best had become politically untenable.

Discouragement and realpolitik—these motivated the gradual retreat of the comprehensive sex educators. But there might have been something else operating, if not on the organizational level, then on the personal. By the 1990s, the sexual revolutionaries were parents, and, especially with AIDS in the picture, they were getting scared for their kids. “It’s precisely because many of us experimented with sex at an early age that we know how problematic it can be,” wrote New Mexico physician Victor Strasburger in the bestselling advice book Getting Your Kids to Say “No” in the ’90s When You Said “Yes” in the ’60s. “It’s only now, when we are parents ourselves, that we are willing to acknowledge that perhaps we might have made a mistake in beginning to have sexual intercourse at too young an age.” He did not elaborate on the “problems” or the effects of that “mistake.” Fourteen years after his book You, Sol

Gordon and his wife, Judith, wrote Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World, which stolidly repudiated their former relativist stance on sexual readiness. “We think that young people should not engage in sexual intercourse until they are at least eighteen and off to college, working or living on their own,” they advised. (In the title of a later edition—as new marketing strategy or sign of remorse?—the authors changed the word conservatively to responsibly.)

Unlike the Gordons’ earlier books, Raising a Child spoke not to teens themselves but to parents, now the designated guardians of their children’s sexual lives. And like Hatch and Denton and the writers of the welfare regulations, these authors were speaking directly to parental fears. Those fears must surely have accounted for the lack of resistance among parents who supported comprehensive sex ed when those few (and it was almost invariably a very few) detractors started showing up at school board meetings. When educators Peter Scales and Martha Roper assayed the sex-ed battlefield in 1996, they discovered that “out of the glare of publicity, most ‘opponents’ and ‘supporters’ of sexuality education share many of the same basic values and hopes for children.”

They also shared the same anxieties. And progressive sex educators, most of whom were parents as well as professionals, had anxieties too. A joke circulating among them in the mid-1990s told the story:

Q: What’s a conservative?
A: A liberal with a teenage daughter.

Abstinence-Only: Fear and Freedom

Here, according to the popular conservative-Christian-authored Sex Respect, are a few of the hazards of nonmarital sex:

Pregnancy, AIDS, guilt, herpes, disappointing parents, chlamydia, inability to concentrate on school, syphilis, embarrassment, abortion, shotgun wedding, gonorrhea, selfishness, pelvic inflammatory disease, heartbreak, infertility, loneliness, cervical cancer, poverty, loss of self-esteem, loss of reputation, being used, suicide, substance abuse, melancholy, loss of faith, possessiveness, diminished ability to communicate, isolation, fewer friendships formed, rebellion against other familial standards, alienation, loss of self-mastery, distrust of [other] sex, viewing others as sex objects, difficulty with
long-term commitments, various other sexually transmitted diseases, aggressions toward women, ectopic pregnancy, sexual violence, loss of sense of responsibility toward others, loss of honesty, jealousy, depression, death.”

“Sadness, not happiness, causes teen sex,” declares a pamphlet published by the same company, and “teen sex causes sadness.” The “Safe Sex” program marketed by the politically influential pro-abstinence, antichoice Medical Institute for Sexual Health, or MISH, packs seventy-five full-color slides of diseased genitals. And in the film No Second Chance a student asks the school nurse, “What if I want to have sex before I get married?” She answers: “Well, I guess you’ll just have to be prepared to die.” It is not for nothing that the comprehensive educators call these fear-based programs.

But the writers of the abstinence-only curricula had a credibility problem. Every kid knows that Mom and Dad, if they were like more than 90 percent of baby boomer adults, did it before they tied the knot, that they took the Pill, had abortions, and came through it alive, well, and seemingly unharmed (unless premarital sex caused baldness and a deafness to decent music). To overcome the consumer’s skepticism, not only did abstinence educators need to instill in kids a reason to run from the lures of sex; they also had to point them toward something worth having. So, believing that teen sex is a form of self-destruction, the abstinence-only people (who are also antichoice activists) ask kids to “choose life,” not necessarily their current lives but better lives further down the road. “Our goal should be to instill hope for their futures: future marriages, spouses, and families,” read the MISH guidelines (sounding not so different from Mary Calderone addressing the Vassar women).

Thus, in alternately bleak and hearty language, the Christian curricula coach their students to wrestle against desire. It is a match worthy of Saint Augustine himself. “At one time in adolescence I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures,” confessed the tortured supplicant. “If only someone could have imposed restraint on my disorder.” Abstinence is not easy, yet the goal is attainable, the abstinence-only educators cheer. And if you don’t succeed at first, you get another chance: you can pledge “secondary virginity.” If only Augustine had taken “Sex Respect.” With that option, he might have finessed his famous dilemma: the yearning to be chaste, but not yet.

Of course, like the young Augustine, the modern teenager isn’t usually thinking that far ahead. When neither stick nor carrot does the trick (disease and death seem improbable, and future happiness vague and remote) there has to be a sweeter, more immediate promise held before the students’ noses. Chastity’s advocates came up with a gold ring that glitters for both kids and parents: “freedom.”

“ Adolescent sexual abstinence offers the freedom to develop respect for oneself and others, use energy to accomplish life goals, be creative in expressing feelings, develop necessary communication skills, develop self-appreciation, achieve financial stability before having a family, and establish greater trust in marriage,” says MISH. In Sex Respect, one version is subtitled “The Option of True Sexual Freedom.” And Teen-Aid claims: “Saving sex brings freedom.”

The only “freedom” reserved for skepticism in these texts is “reproductive freedom,” put between quotes by Teen-Aid’s authors, who also note the feminist provenance of the idea and list it among the “myths of premarital sex” that students are encouraged to challenge. (“Consider: Who waits anxiously each month for her period? Whose lifestyle is drastically changed?”) “Men” are directed to ponder, “Where is the freedom in worrying about getting a girl pregnant?” As is common in abstinence ed, the gender-unequal burdens of sex are acknowledged, but claims to gender equality are dismissed, even denigrated—here, with the implication that feminists are fighting for pie in the sky and that “men” do best honoring their paternalistic obligation to “girls” by respecting their purity.

The idea of freedom, soaring like an aria over the ostinato of sexual peril, was a stroke of marketing brilliance, resonating with a major theme of American history and advertising. Freedom can mean anything from universal suffrage to a choice of twenty-seven flavors of Snapple, and bondage anything from chattel slavery to the discomfort of bulky sanitary pads. But as Aunt Lydia told the women whose lives were consecrated to breeding babies for the ruling classes in Margaret Atwood’s dystopic-futurist novel The Handmaid’s Tale, “There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from.” Referring to the democratic, gender-egalitarian period before the totalitarian theocracy that cannily resembles the one radical Christians might like to create in the United States, Lydia says, “In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.” The narrator,
even as she cowers behind the fear that the aunts’ protection has
begun to instill in her, longs for the confusing but exhilarating
“freedom to.”

Like their fictional counterparts, the cleverest marketers of abstin-
ence seem to intuit that teens vacillate between the attractions of
the two kinds of freedom. With the popular culture pulling for
“freedom to” engage in sex, and their teachers holding out “fre-
edom from” all the sexual and emotional fuss and muss implied in
growing up, students are by turns impressed by and dismissive of
the dangers hyperbolized in abstinence education. Like advertising,
which must continually jack up its seduction just to stay visible as
other advertising proliferates, abstinence education had to make
sex scarier and scarier and, at the same time, chastity sweeter. By
neglecting the other information about pleasure that good sex-
ed could offer, fear and freedom had a fighting chance against teen-
age desire.

Family Life
If abstinence offers kids the freedom from growing up, it tenders to
parents an equally impossible corollary, freedom from watching
their kids grow up. That promise is fully consonant with what con-
servative parents want for themselves and their children, and some-
times it is fulfilled, at least temporarily. A woman I met at a con-
vention of the conservative Christian organization Concerned
Women for America told me that her fifteen-year-old daughter’s “crisis
pregnancy” turned out to be “a blessing.” In renouncing her sexual
relationship and pledging herself to “secondary virginity,” the girl
reconnected with her family. During her confinement, before she
gave the baby up for adoption, she spent time with her mother,
shopping, talking, and praying; she played with her sisters, went
to church midweek with her father. Literally unsteady on her feet,
alienated from the pleasures that had pulled her toward her boy-
friend and away from family and church, she was now thrown back
to childlike dependence and gratitude, precisely at the age when she
might otherwise have spurned her parents’ best-meant solicitations
in order to fly on her own.

For more moderate or liberal parents, the wish for such a “fre-
dom” is more conflicted. The majority of American adults champi-
on sexuality education at school: the very first Gallup Poll, in 1943,
found 68 percent of parents favoring it, and even the heaviest
right-wing fire in the 1980s and 1990s didn’t manage to blast away
the base of that support, which consistently bested 80 percent. But
parents also embrace abstinence. Most concede that their kids
will probably have sex in their teens, in other words, but surveying
the dangers their children face, also wish they wouldn’t.

Abstinence-plus speaks to these mothers and fathers. The plus
addresses the rational concession that sex will happen. But the ab-
stinence connects powerfully to that deep parental wish: to protect
and “keep” their children by guarding their childhood. In this sense,
abstinence is about reversing, or at least holding back, the coming
of age, which for parents is a story of loss, as their children es-
ablish passionate connections with people and values outside the
family.

Even for parents who revel in their children’s emerging sexuality,
it can mean loss. A strong feminist advocate of sexual freedom de-
scribed watching her son, then about seventeen, standing side by
side with his girlfriend at her living room window. “They were not
hugging or kissing, but every part of their bodies was touching,”
she recalled. “The light from the window was all around them, but
there was no light between them. Immediately, I knew they had
made love.” Twenty years later, the memory still brought a wistful
softness to her face. “I went to the kitchen and burst into tears,
because I knew I was no longer the most important woman in my
son’s life.”

In some advertising copy in 1997, SIECUS president Debra Haff-
ner criticized abstinence-only education as a kind of child neglect.
“When we treat sexuality as adults-only,” she said, “we abandon
teenagers to learn about their sexuality on their own, by trial and
error.” Her point was correct and crucial: accurate, positively
communicated, and effectively transmitted information about sexu-
ality makes the going happier, easier, and far less dangerous for
young people. Abstinence-only education falsely promises parents
it can eliminate the awfulness of watching children try and fail (be-
because by the time they get to sex, they will be adults and able to
handle it). But comprehensive education may also encourage a simi-
larly unrealistic, but profoundly held, parental hope: that teen
sexuality can be rational, protected, and heartbreak-free.

“The nature of teen romance is that it is tortured, and then it
ends,” the writer and former sex educator Sharon Thompson com-
mented, laughing sympathetically. Thompson sees not only the
avoidance of romantic pitfalls but also the knocks themselves as potentially "educative." She advocates "romance education," but she also knows that adults can't save their kids from le chagrin d'amour. Contrary to the implication in Haffner's plea that adults not "abandon" teens to sexual trial and error, the fact is that sexual relationships are by definition what teenagers do on their own, and the only way for teens to learn about them is to try—which usually means failing, too. "Maturity," including sexual maturity, cannot be attained without practice, and in sex as in skiing, practice is risky.

Haffner's statement fits with the contemporary belief that parents can be involved in every aspect of their children's lives, from soccer to sex. It is not surprising that this should be the direction in which sex education is turning. In the 1980s, sexuality ed was renamed family life education, even by Planned Parenthood, sending the message that sex belongs in the context of the heterosexual reproductive family. Along with sexual responsibility, students in many family-life courses learn the skills of householder and parent, the definitions of adulthood in centuries past. One course included a lesson on filling out a tax return. In almost all programs, parental consent forms are distributed at the start of the course. A tactic initially used to defuse community opposition, these forms also stack up as de facto acquiescence by sex educators to a parental "right" of control over their children's sexuality.

The comprehensives, who have long encouraged parents to talk frankly with children from early on, also have recognized that many won't or can't. Now, however, that balanced understanding is subtly drifting—with the gale force of political pressure from the Right behind it—toward more reliance on parents. With it have come many programs to educate them on how to be "the primary sex educators of their children," as the phrase always goes.

"Parent education" is a fine idea. But because the political goal is more about some liberal version of family values than it is about creating the highest-quality education, some of the courses get their priorities mixed up. One such curriculum is "Can We Talk?" a four-session video and discussion program for parents created by the visually inventive Dominic Capello under the sponsorship of the National Education Association and the Health Information Network. After a training session for educators, I expressed my concern to Capello that there seemed to be little guidance to parents about what they should say and that they therefore might well say inaccurate and bigoted things to their children—that masturbation causes blindness, for instance, or that Pop will beat you black and blue if you come home pregnant. "There's plenty of information in there," he countered, pointing to the twenty pages (with lots of white space and pictures) on puberty, reproduction, pregnancy, AIDS, and anatomy in the three-ring binder parent participants receive. (I suggested that in the next edition he add the clitoris to the list of relevant female body parts.) "But this is a first step," said Capello, an openly gay man who started his career as an art director for a radical queer magazine. "We're trying to help parents learn to communicate their values"—whatever those values may be.

Allies of comprehensive sexuality education have not ceased agitating for higher professionalism among sexuality educators (who are now, likely as not, the gym teacher or other reluctant draftee), through more rigorous training and accreditation. They have continued to lobby for compulsory school-based comprehensive sex ed taught by trained instructors. Yet the increasing propaganda and programmatic creep toward the kitchen table, at the very moment schoolteachers are being gagged in the classroom, amounts to a capitulation to the Right's agenda. Parent education, even well-trained parent education, affirms the new orthodoxy that parents possess the sex-educational will and competence whose very absence mobilized the founders of sex instruction nearly a century ago.

These recent moves toward parent education bespeak a contradiction inside sex ed. On the one hand, they are consistent with the historical conservatism of the discipline, which has always consigned sex to marriage and aimed to strengthen parental authority. On the other, they represent a retreat from the critique of the family implicit in school-based sexuality education, which endorses the sexual-intellectual autonomy of children and suggests that the family, with its hierarchical structure, its neuroses, ignorance, and taboos, is not the best sex educator after all.

**Successes and Failures**

After rising steadily from 1970, the rate of teen intercourse in America dropped a smidgen in the 1990s, while the teen pregnancy and birth rates slid, by 17 percent and 19 percent, respectively (these were still the highest in the developed world, about comparable with Bulgaria). Unsurprisingly, many link these two facts to a spreading conservatism among kids, including the embrace of...
virginity. The renewed popularity of virginity has been attributed to abstinence education.

Examined more closely, however, the causal relationship between abstinence education and a reduction in teen pregnancy is, at best, small. A major analysis by the Alan Guttmacher Institute attributes about a fourth of the decline to delayed intercourse but three-quarters to improved contraceptive use among sexually experienced teenagers. In Europe, where kids have as much sex as they do in America, teen pregnancy rates are about a fourth as high as ours.

In the Netherlands, where celibacy is not taught, contraception is free through the national health service, and condoms are widely available in vending machines, “teenage pregnancy seems virtually eliminated as a health and social problem,” according to Dr. Simone Buitendijk of the Dutch Institute for Applied Scientific Research. Fewer than 1 percent of Dutch fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds become pregnant each year. “The pragmatic European approach to teenage sexual activity, expressed in the form of widespread provision of confidential and accessible contraceptive services to adolescents, is ... a central factor in explaining the more rapid declines in teenage childbearing in northern and western European countries, in contrast to slower decreases in the United States,” commented the authors of another, cross-national Guttmacher study.

There may even be an inverse relationship between abstinence education and declining rates of pregnancy. For one thing, because many abstinence programs teach kids that refraining from intercourse is the only surefire way to prevent pregnancy and vastly exaggerate the failures of contraception and condoms, students get the impression that birth control and STD prevention methods don’t work. So they shrug off using them or don’t know how to use them. Contraception education, on the other hand, works: teens who learn about birth control and condoms are 70 to 80 percent more likely to protect themselves if they have intercourse than kids who are not given such lessons.

More fundamentally, though, it is a truth universally acknowledged among social scientists that attitude is one thing and behavior quite another. In one major recent government survey, only about a quarter of kids who hadn’t yet had intercourse expected to do so while they were still in their teens. In reality, twice as many do. Good intentions, moreover, are the paving-stones on the road to what public-health professionals call bad outcomes. In this case, the outcome proves another sad truth: “good girls get caught.” A good girl, by definition, is not a girl with condoms and lube in her backpack. As Planned Parenthood’s curriculum “Positive Images” points out, “Abstinence often fails, i.e., people who intended to be abstinent have sexual intercourse and don’t use either a contraceptive or a condom.”

In a recent analysis of the massive National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Columbia University sociologist Peter Bearman looked at the success of “chastity pledges.” The pledges, usually taken publicly as part of a Christian fundamentalist virginity movement, have indeed given several million teens the personal gumption and peer support to postpone intercourse—on average, eighteen months longer than nonpledgers. But in the end, such pledges are counterproductive to developing habits of lifetime sexual responsibility. When they broke the promise, as almost all did, these fallen angels were less effective contraceptors than their peers who had become active earlier. The study of Philadelphia middle schoolers reported in *JAMA* educed the same results. When the abstinence-only students engaged in intercourse a year later, a third of them did so without protection. Fewer than one-tenth of the group who had been taught about condoms took that risk.

Another little-publicized fillip in the statistics is this: when analysts at the Centers for Disease Control looked more closely at the diminishing teen-sex rates, they found that boys were having less intercourse (15 percent less from 1991 to 1997), but girls’ rates hadn’t slowed. The practice that had declined among girls was unprotected intercourse. Condom use, not chastity, more plausibly explains the encouraging news about declining teen pregnancy.

In the end, sex education classes may be no more responsible for any sexual “outcomes” than the larger culture in which the classes are embedded. Advocates for Youth, which leads annual summer tours of the European sex-ed field for American educators, has observed that the Continent’s relatively low rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases are rooted most of all in Europeans’ attitudes about sex. “Adults see intimate sexual relationships as normal and natural for older adolescents, a positive component of emotionally healthy maturation,” a brief report of the early tours’ lessons said. “At the same time, young people believe it is ‘stupid and irresponsible’ to have sex without protection.
and use the maxim, ‘safe sex or no sex.’ The morality of sexual behavior is weighed through an individual ethic that includes the values of responsibility, love, respect, tolerance, and equity.”

Of course, inculcating values is a large part of what sex education is and has always been about. The Right is less shy than the Left about saying this. Sadly, of the lofty list above, tolerance and equity are not exactly majority values among American teens. But, Bearman found, neither are love and respect expressed through chastity. Indeed, an interesting thing about chastity pledges is that virginity must remain a minority value, and the pledgers a countercultural clique, in order to succeed. As soon as more than about 30 percent of a school’s students climb on, the pledged virgins start falling off the wagon.

At any rate, most mainstream professional organizations have deduced that declining rates of teen pregnancy can be attributed to a combination of abstinence messages and contraceptive and safe-sex information; in 1999 the American Medical Association and other prominent organizations endorsed abstinence-plus education. And to be sure, for many of these social-sexual changes the comprehensive, or abstinence-plus curricula, can take credit. Still, there is evidence that the most impressive gains of such programs lie in the “pluses”: students’ tolerance toward sexual difference, increased contraceptive and condom use, and improved sexual negotiation skills.

So how do the abstinence-pliers score in the main event, achieving abstinence from intercourse? Kids who get a taste of the full menu of sex-ed topics postpone intercourse longer than those who receive no such classes. But on a measure of virginity-guarding months, the ab-plusers have done almost as pitifully as the ab-nays. According to the evaluation of one “plus” plan, the length of time students held off intercourse averaged seven months. A kid who resists on New Year’s Eve, in other words, succumbs on the Fourth of July.

“Criminal” Activities

As the decades plod on, some public-school comprehensive sex educators work harder, taking risks to teach what needs to be taught. Others toe the line and feel discouraged. Some quit their jobs to move to alternative institutions—churches, community, gay and lesbian, or AIDS-education groups, progressive chapters of

moderate national organizations like Planned Parenthood, or rare innovative outfits like New Jersey’s Network for Family Life Education, which puts out the excellent teen-run publication and Web site Sexed.com.

But nationally influential progressive sex educators are a dwindling crew: Janice Irvine, who has studied community conflicts over sex education for more than a decade and before that was a sex educator herself, could count fewer than a dozen such people. Some “outsider” educators, seeing their ideas pushed further and further to the margins, have broached the possibility of shifting sex ed out of the public schools altogether in favor of invigorating public-service media and community-based educational strategies—an idea that others, including me, criticize as misguided.

Some formerly committed teachers have lined up at the abstinence-only trough, ethics be damned. A Minneapolis sex-ed consultant told me boldly one morning in 1998 that “we’ve been doing sex ed wrong for the past fifteen years.” How so? “We say sex is bad for kids, and it isn’t.” The interview was rushed, because that afternoon she was slated to do a teacher-training workshop—on the city’s new abstinence-only curricula. Huh? “It helps me get more business in town,” the educator explained. If a woman with these beliefs was now concealing them in order to preach the gospel of chastity to young teachers, I despaired of the next generation of sex educators, not to mention their students.

The Minneapolis teacher was an extreme example of a slow but sure surrender by a significant portion of the sex-ed mainstream to the demands of a brazen right-wing minority. But not that extreme. In the fall of 2000, the super-mainstream National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, in Washington, D.C., placed free public-service advertisements in youth-directed publications such as Teen People and Vibe. Each ad featured a photo of a teenager (ethnic and stylistic diversity dutifully respected) with a large word emblazoned across it: NOBODY, USELESS, CHEAP, DIRTY, REJECT, PRICK. Smaller, far less legible type soften these smears: “Now that I’m home with a baby, NOBODY calls me anymore”; “All it took was one PRICK to get my girlfriend pregnant. At least that’s what her friends say.” (The prick apparently was not the boy in the picture.)

Some people in the field, including Advocates for Youth president James Wagoner, were outraged by the resurrection of these ugly stereotypes of sexually active or pregnant teens and charged
the campaign with blaming teens, whom “society” has denied “access to information and confidential sexual health services—and a true stake in the future.” But in one of its mailings, the National Campaign held up as a shield the encomia of teens who (spontaneously?) wrote in to praise the advertisements. “They don’t glamorize sex,” one correspondent said. “They simply show the reality.”

Yes, this campaign did show the reality at the turn of the twenty-first century: shame and blame still surround teen sexuality, and its prosecutors are not Bible-thumpers but “responsible” sex educators and teens themselves. The Right also indicted the ads, by the way, for neglecting to pitch abstinence. But Focus on the Family could have blown them up and plastered them across the stage at their 2001 national convention. A pretty, pouty Latina with cheap slashed across her bare belly in big bright letters, a brown-skinned boy in a backward cap with the scarlet letters useless labeling him—these, better than anything their public-relations firms could have produced, proclaimed the conservative activists’ good news: Victory!

The Right won, but the mainstream let it. Comprehensive sex educators had the upper hand in the 1970s, and starting in the 1980s, they allowed their enemies to seize more and more territory, until the Right controlled the law, the language, and the cultural consensus. Sad as the comprehensive sex educators’ story is, they must share some of the blame for what the abstinence-only movement has wrought in the lives of the young. Commenting on its failure to defend explicit sexuality education during an avalanche of new HIV infection among teenagers, Sharon Thompson said, “We will look back at this time and indict the sex-education community as criminal. It’s like being in a nuclear power plant that has a leak, and not telling anybody.”

6. Compulsory Motherhood

The End of Abortion

Johnny and Janey sitting in a tree,
KISSING.
First comes love,
Then comes marriage,
Then comes Janey with a baby carriage.
—children’s rhyme

Abstinence education is the good cop of conservative “family re-planning,” by which human relations are restored to what the Right views as a “traditional” structure (Dad on top, Mom next, kids below that) and sex to its “traditional” function, procreation. But if a teen cannot be persuaded to tarry in celibate, parent-controlled childhood and insists on being both young and sexual, the Right has a bad cop. Its job is to barricade the option of abortion. This imposes a sentence of immediate and irrevocable adulthood on any “child” who crosses the sexual line and makes a mistake. Compulsory motherhood can be effected in two ways, legally and culturally.

On the legal front, the anti-abortion movement has had a mixed record, with many of its initiatives found unconstitutional. Nevertheless, its record over nearly thirty years shows a dogged climb toward success. Almost from the moment the Supreme Court legalized abortion in Roe v. Wade in 1973, lobbyists and activists have kept up a steady presence in every legislative chamber, including Congress. Only four years after the ruling, President Jimmy Carter