

## Sex Education Politics and the War on Young Women

### The “War on Women” and Teen Girls

Recent political rhetoric suggests that there exists a “war on women” in current sexual health policy initiatives. This “war” extends to young teen women, sex education, and most specifically - access to contraception. The premise of the argument asserts that if women, regardless of age, have confidential, easy and even cost-free access to contraception, they will be empowered, affirmed, and in the best place to achieve future success. While well-intentioned proponents hope their premise is correct, the facts suggest this goal is shortsighted, misinformed, and actually places adolescent girls at increased risk.

Birth control has very limited effectiveness in enabling young women to take charge of their futures. In some ways, assuming that contraception is an answer to teen girl empowerment minimizes the value and potential of the young woman, simplistically equating her success and happiness to her ability to access a pill or a condom. But success sequencing for young women should focus on primary prevention skills that protect them from victimization, sexualization, and objectification. Access to contraception does nothing to address these problems and can even help to perpetuate them. Teen women are empowered not by limitless access to contraception, but by messages and skills that inspire them to see their value apart from cultural “sexpectations.”

Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education enables girls to build positive assets, gain self-confidence, and set goals for themselves and their futures. These programs help them see that their value is not determined by whether they have sex with their dates. Young teen women are more likely to reach their goals when they postpone immediate gratification in exchange for a thought-out plan for their futures that is self determined rather than circumstantially determined. The holistic SRA education approach views young women as individuals with unlimited potential, who are worth much more than the price of a condom or a pill.

### Teen Sex and the Burden of Young Women

Young women should be encouraged to achieve their dreams - and the messages and the support they receive should reveal the reality that they are more vulnerable than boys to the potentially negative effects of teen sex.

While pregnancy is the most obvious unintended result of sex, it is not the only one – and often not the most serious one.

Research paints a stark picture that shows that access to contraception will neither prevent nor cure these negative consequences that often plague young women who experiment with teen sex:

- One in four teen girls has at least one STD. <sup>1</sup> Two of the four most prevalent STDs among teen girls can still be contracted even with the use of a condom - and other contraceptive methods do nothing to reduce their transmission. <sup>2</sup>
- Numerous studies have shown that girls bear the brunt of emotional fallout when sex is added to their relationship <sup>3</sup>
- Women who become sexually active as young teens are almost twice as likely to divorce as their peers who waited for sex. <sup>4</sup>
- The earlier a girl has first sex, the more likely it is to be unwanted, suggesting predatory victimization. <sup>5</sup>
- The earlier a girl initiates sex, the more lifetime partners she will have. <sup>6</sup>
- Most sexually active teen girls expressed regret for having sex too soon. <sup>7</sup>
- Teens are less likely to use condoms if they have a long-term dating relationship, thus increasing their susceptibility to STDs and decreasing the efficacy of contraceptive-centered sex education. <sup>8</sup>
- Teen girls who have sex are also more likely to engage in other risky behaviors. <sup>9</sup>

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## What Message Really Empowers Teen Women?

A groundbreaking study by the Brookings Institute revealed that at-risk teens are virtually protected from living in poverty if they wait until marriage to have children, finish their education, and have a job.<sup>10</sup> Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education equips teens with the skills to achieve this success.

SRA is holistic, discussing teen sex within the context of the many related reference points for teens. Yes, SRA education talks about how the use of contraception can reduce the risk of pregnancy or STDs, but these “programs choose to inform teens with facts and avoid turning sex education classes into condom advocacy sessions.”<sup>11</sup> The message unequivocally encourages teens to wait for sex. Students are no less likely to use contraception if they do become sexually active but the research shows they delay sex longer and have fewer partners.<sup>12</sup>

Empowering young women with the skills and motivation to avoid sexual risk necessitates engaged conversation that properly contextualizes sex as more than a physical act. While it is true that teens often experience natural curiosity and sexual desire in tandem with the physical maturation process, early sexual activity can also be linked to low feelings of self worth and efficacy, poor decision-making skills, or an absence of future orientation. Teens benefit when they are given positive guidance and education that can help them navigate their teen years in the culture without jeopardizing their health and future goals.

Therefore, SRA education inspires teen girls to set future goals – and then put steps in place to reach those goals, with the understanding that waiting for sex will increase the likelihood of their achievement.

## Teen Girls Need More Than Birth Control to Realize Their Dreams

Since 2010, federal sex education policy has focused almost exclusively on “teen pregnancy prevention.” This myopic approach is a troubling departure from previous sex education strategies that focused on the broader implications of teen sex. Mounting social science research points to the many potentially adverse consequences of teen sex, especially for young girls, even if no pregnancy ensues.

The same groups who tout easy access to contraception as the answer to teen female empowerment are also quick to assert that they support “comprehensive” sex education. They insist that the approach places a strong emphasis on sexual risk avoidance but also provides information about contraception, purportedly “covering all the bases” for teens. However, numerous independent studies (including a landmark study by HHS)<sup>13</sup> confirm that the most popular Sexual Risk Reduction (SRR) “comprehensive” programs contain no such thing. SRR “comprehensive” programs typically:

- Focus only on the physical consequences of sex and equate “sex with a condom” as sex without risk.
- Provide few, if any, skill-building activities that encourage sexual risk avoidance from sexual activity.
- Encourage non-intercourse sexual activity as healthy ‘risk avoidance’ alternatives, even though such activity can put a teen at risk for STDs.
- Rarely encourage sexually active teens to refrain from sex.
- Devote majority of their time building condom usage skills and negotiation techniques with partners.
- Contain the most explicit sex education on the market.
- View teens’ ability to delay sex as unrealistic, even though CDC data shows that most teens have not had sex.

“Comprehensive” sex education programs are narrow, “siloes” programs that concentrate primarily on condom education as they expect teens to engage in sex willingly and without risk.



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Writer H. L. Mencken once said: “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” Simple solutions to complex problems are always enticing, but unfortunately, they are also usually unsuccessful and costly. Contraceptive-centered “comprehensive” sex education is a narrow and over- simplistic approach to teen sex. This sex education approach assumes that teen sex is okay (even healthy) as long as it is consensual and with contraception, but the statistics show that the earlier a person becomes sexually active the more at risk they are for negative consequences of sex.<sup>14</sup> While contraception is most effective at preventing pregnancy, only the condom reduces the risk of acquiring an STD.<sup>15</sup>

At best, contraception reduces the physical risks of teen sex but does nothing to deal with many issues that a condom or other contraception can never address. We must declare war on messages that equate an adolescent girl’s ability to achieve success with her ability to use contraception. On the contrary, young teen women must be empowered to achieve the health and well being they deserve. This can only be accomplished when they feel confident in their ability to achieve their goals and full potential in life – goals that are inspired by purpose, ability, and self determination– not simplistically defined by access to contraception and casual sex.

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