

A catastrophe for the conservatives: abstinence leads to pregnancy

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/05/13/1084289819834.html>

Protecting young people from sexual knowledge is simply a formula for disaster, writes George Monbiot.

A US evangelical group has announced that next month it will be recruiting British teenagers to its campaign against sex before marriage. In the United States, more than a million have taken the pledge. "Britain," the organiser says, "is fascinated with the idea of sexual abstinence." In my day such a fellow would have been horsewhipped. Yet young people are flocking to him.

The abstinence campaign that hopes to corrupt the morals of our once proud nation - a group called the Silver Ring Thing - has so far received \$US700,000 (\$1 million) from George Bush as part of his campaign to replace sex education with Victorian values. This year he doubled the federal budget for virginity training to \$US270 million. In terms of participation, his program is working. In every other respect it's a catastrophe.

No one could dispute that thousands of teenagers in Britain and the US are suffering as a result of sex before marriage. Teenage pregnancies are concentrated at the bottom of the social scale: teenage daughters of unskilled labourers are 10 times as likely to become pregnant as middle-class girls. UNICEF says women born into poverty are twice as likely to stay poor if they have their children too soon.

The prevalence of teenage pregnancy and venereal disease in Britain and the US is generally blamed on lax morals and a permissive welfare state. Teenagers are in trouble today, the conservatives who dominate this debate say, because of the sexual liberation of the 1960s and '70s and the willingness of the state to support single mothers. Denny Pattyn, the founder of the Silver Ring Thing, calls this "the cesspool generation - suffering the catastrophic effects of the sexual revolution".

Were we to accept the conservatives' version, we would expect that the nations in which sex education and access to contraception are most widespread to be those that suffer most from teenage pregnancy and STDs. The truth is the other way around. The two countries at the top of the disaster league, the US and Britain, are those in which conservative campaigns are among the strongest, and sex education and access to contraception among the weakest. The US, the UN Population Fund's figures show, has 53 births per 1000 teenagers - a record worse than those of India, the Philippines and Rwanda.

In Britain the figure is 20. The nations the conservatives would place at the top of the list are clumped at the bottom. Germany and Norway produce 11 babies per 1000 teenagers, Finland eight, Sweden and Denmark seven and the Netherlands five. [Australia's rate is 18 per 1000.]

UNICEF's explanation is unequivocal. Sweden, for example, changed its sex education policies in 1975. STDs, in contrast to the rising rates in Britain and the US, declined by 40 per cent in the '90s.

"Studies of the Dutch experience," says UNICEF, "have concluded that the underlying reason for success has been the combination of a relatively inclusive society with more open attitudes towards sex and sex education, including contraception." Requests for contraceptives are "not associated with shame or embarrassment", and the media carries "explicit messages" about them "designed for young people". This teeming cesspool has among the lowest abortion and teenage birth rates on earth.

The US and Britain, by contrast, are "less inclusive societies" where "contraceptive advice and services may be formally available, but in a 'closed' atmosphere of embarrassment and secrecy".

The catastrophe, in other words, has been caused not by liberal teachers, liberated parents and Marie Stopes International but by those who campaign against early sex education, discourage access to contraceptives and agitate against the social inclusion (income equality, the welfare state) that offers young women better prospects than getting knocked up.

Abstinence campaigns such as the Silver Ring Thing delay sexual activity, but when their victims are sucked into the cesspool (nearly all eventually are), they are, says a study at Columbia University, around a third less likely to use contraceptives as they are not "prepared for an experience that they have promised to forgo". The result, a paper in the British Medical Journal shows, is that abstinence programs are "associated with an increase in the number of pregnancies among partners of young male participants". You read that right: abstinence training increases the rate of teenage pregnancy.

If all this were widely known, conservatives and evangelicals would never dare to make the claims they do.
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