



The stark limitations of sex education classes

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Our upcoming report on sex education will be released next month.

Decades after being brought to Canadian classrooms, sexuality education still strikes a nerve.

Consider a recent complaint to the Alberta Human Rights Commission. The Edmonton Public School Board had contracted a small section of their sexuality education to a faith-based pregnancy centre, prompting a parent to

file a complaint. Or recall Ontario's new health curriculum that got shelved in 2010 after parents complained about the content. Note that the curriculum is likely to be implemented next fall.

There is little agreement among parents about what a sex education curriculum should look like, ensuring controversy will continue. Authors of a 2002 study of parents in New Brunswick concluded, "Although the vast majority of parents support SHE [sexual health education], they do not necessarily share a common vision of the nature, content, and timing of an ideal SHE curriculum."¹

The fact remains that parents are their children's primary sex educators. Parental relationships and home environments have a critical influence on kids. This is especially important when considering the limited impact of school based curriculums.

More knowledge not always linked to safer behaviour

A number of studies have shown that sexual health knowledge does not necessarily correlate with safer behaviour. A study of university students in the UK found that despite knowing about the transmission and consequences of STDS, many students continued engaging in risk

¹ Weaver, A.D, Byers, E.S., Sears, H.A, Cohen, J.N. & Randall, H.E.S. (2002). Sexual health education at school and at home: Attitudes and experiences of New Brunswick parents. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, Vol. 11 no. 1, p. 20.

behaviour.² A 2009 study in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* concluded, "Adolescents with more sexual knowledge do not necessarily have safer sex behaviour."³

In the mid-2000s, New Brunswick introduced the type of progressive curriculum advocates favour. Between 2006 and 2010, the teen pregnancy rate in New Brunswick increased by almost 40%.⁴ The finding reminds us that complex factors influence teen sexual decision making well beyond simply having the right curriculum.

Sexual behaviour and physical, emotional and social development

Adolescent development illuminates the nature of teen sexual behavior. It can inform adults and particularly parents about how to help teens make healthy decisions.

American psychologist Laurence Steinberg suggests that neuroscience explains why adolescents engage in risk behaviour despite knowing and understanding consequences. He argues that teen brains are still developing in areas key to the regulation of behaviour, emotion, and the perception and evaluation of risk and reward.⁵

Steinberg argues that teens also rely heavily on emotional and social influences when making decisions. He suggests, "[T]he developments of early adolescence may well create a situation in which one is starting an engine without yet having a skilled driver behind the wheel."⁶ Therefore, teen sexual decisions are often made in the heat of the moment when emotions and social influences are heightened. Perhaps this is why relational influence is so important, including parental relationships and the home environment.

The nature of teen sexual behaviour

Author and family physician Leonard Sax told *MacLean's* magazine in an interview, "Parents have this 1980s mindset that you should give your child autonomy and independence, let your children make their own mistakes...That '80s mindset is wildly inappropriate in the 21st century."⁷

One reason Sax gives for a hands-on approach is his concern for the sexualisation of girls leading to the loss of middle childhood (ages 8 to 12). Sax argues, "We have girls who are

² Jones, N.R. & Haynes, R. (2006, Sept). The association between young people's knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and their behaviour: A mixed methods study. *Health, Risk and Society* Vol. 8, issue 3.

³ Lou, J.H. & Chen, S. H. (2009). Relationships among sexual knowledge, sexual attitudes, and safe sex behaviour among adolescents: A structural equation model. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 46, p. 1600.

⁴ McKay, A. (2013). Trends in Canadian national and provincial/territorial teen pregnancy rates: 2001-2010. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 3 & 4, p. 165.

⁵ Steinberg, L. (2005, Feb). Cognitive and affective development in adolescence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 69.

⁶ Steinberg, *Cognitive and affective*, p. 70.

⁷ Leonard Sax as quoted by Fillion, K. (2010, May 10). Gender expert Leonard Sax on the empty world of girls. *MacLean's*, p. 21.

now putting on a pretence of adult sexuality that they couldn't possibly feel, and the danger of putting on a show is that you lose touch with your own sexuality."⁸

Developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld points out that teen sex is rarely just about sex. It is often more about control, power, the drive to be desired and accepted and ultimately about seeking the deep human need for attachment. Sexual intimacy requires maturity. But Neufeld writes, "The sex of adolescence seldom comes with the protection of commitment, the promise of exclusivity, the tenderness of consideration, or the support of the community. It is sex that is unprotected in the deepest sense – psychologically."⁹

Neufeld argues from his experience of working with adolescents that teens who engage with multiple partners become emotionally numb. He suggests that sex loses its potency for bonding. "The long-term effect is soul-numbing, impairing young people's capacity to enter into relationships in which true contact and intimacy are possible."¹⁰ He argues that much of the blatant talk of sexuality among teens today has little to do with openness or progress, but is a sign of the loss of intimacy and vulnerability needed for intimate bonding.¹¹

Teens benefit from having strong bonds with adults as they develop and mature. Research confirms that the relationship parents develop with young children and the type of home life they create continues to benefit young people in their teen years.¹² It is important that parents address sexual health issues in an age appropriate manner with their children. It's critical they develop strong parent/child relationships and a parenting style that is warm and supportive with clear communication and appropriate supervision that helps young people thrive.¹³

School based curriculum is a limited tool. Teens need the guidance and support parents are perfectly placed to provide.

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⁸ Sax as quoted by Fillion, *Gender expert*, p. 19.

⁹ Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2005). *Hold on to Your Kids*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, p. 162.

¹⁰ Neufeld & Maté, *Hold on*, p. 160.

¹¹ Neufeld & Maté, *Hold on*, p. 161.

¹² Mitchell, P.J. (2009). *Rated PG. How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity*. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/rated-pg>

¹³ DeVore, E.R., Ginsburg, K.R. (2005, August). The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 17(4).