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## **The Personal and Societal Consequences of the Sexual Revolution: The Elephant in Character Education's Living Room**

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**The Personal and Societal Consequences of the Sexual Revolution:  
The Elephant in Character Education’s Living Room**

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A few years ago, I read *Light of the World*, a book-long conversation between then Pope Benedict XVI and the journalist Peter Seewald. At one point, Seewald prefaced a question to the Pope with a description of our times:

We see a world in danger of sliding into the abyss. We see an unrestrained economic system ready to mutate into a predatory capitalism that devours values on a huge scale. We see that life in the fast lane robs us of our moral compass. We see the growth of a society that plunges ahead recklessly with no clear sense of direction, regarding today as right what yesterday was considered wrong. We have new addictions to things such as video games and pornography. We have the almost unmanageable stress produced by the mania for profit maximization that drives the business world. We have the precarious situation of children who suffer because of the loss of family relations. We have the dominance of the media, which have developed a culture bent on breaking our taboos, dumbing us down, and blunting our moral sense.

We could add to this list other ills that confront us: the persisting problem of peer cruelty that makes schools unsafe and deeply damages children around the world; the ecological fragility of the planet; the “extreme poverty”—households struggling to survive on less than \$1 a day (what the economist Jeffrey Sachs calls “the poverty that kills”)—afflicting one-sixth of the human race; terrorism that seemingly can strike anyone at any time; religious and racial intolerance; the scandal of human trafficking; wars that have no end in sight; and a refugee crisis on a scale not seen since World War 2.

The goal of character education is to cultivate all the virtues—moral virtues, intellectual virtues, performance virtues, and civic virtues—that human beings need in order to lead ethical lives and become moral agents who help build a more humane, just, and peaceful world. We obviously can’t solve all the world’s problems, but we can be part of the solution.

In this paper, I would like to describe a set of human problems that I believe gets much less attention than it merits—from the media, the intelligentsia, the academic community, religious institutions, education in general, and character education in particular. These problems are result of the profound social changes brought about by the sexual revolution, arguably the dominant cultural revolution of the past half-century.

After describing the problematic personal and societal consequences of the sexual revolution, I would like to offer for your consideration some thoughts on how, as character educators, we might address these challenges in our schools, families, and societies. Good work has already been done;

see, for example, the section on character-based sex education in Chapter 5 of our *Smart & Good High Schools* study ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)). Some of this work has been done by people in the character education movement, and much of it—at least in the U.S.—by the best of the abstinence education programs that began in the 1980s as a response to the “safe sex” approach to sexuality education that was one of the legacies of the sexual revolution.

Unfortunately, the available character-based resources for developing what the educator John Williams calls “ethical sexuality”<sup>1</sup> are, I believe, underused by the schools, parents, and communities that could benefit from them. They are underused, I think, at least in part because many if not most character education theorists and practitioners seem not to see educating for character in the sexual domain as central to the mission of character education. Many seem not to see it as part of their mission at all.

Why not? To be sure, sex education can be a minefield. It’s understandable to want to leave it to the health education teacher or the school nurse. Or we may believe that sex is highly personal, a private matter, not a proper subject for character education. When it comes to sex, it’s tempting to embrace a minimalist morality: Don’t force sex on anyone; try not to get someone pregnant or infected with an STD; let people follow their own sexual conscience about what’s right and wrong as long as “no one gets hurt.”

All that said, I would like to make the case that character education will fail our children, and ultimately society, if it doesn’t help our young develop sexual wisdom and more virtuous habits in this crucial and vulnerable area of their lives. If we aren’t more pro-active in combatting the problematic effects of the sexual revolution and helping our youth exercise virtue in their sexual lives, we’ll be cheating them of a dimension of character development they very much need in order to lead flourishing lives and create a flourishing society.

### **Sex and Character**

What is the connection between sex and character?

Throughout history and across most cultures, self-discipline—the control of our impulses, appetites, and passions—has been considered a mark of good character. In his book *The Moral Sense*,<sup>2</sup> the political scientist James Q. Wilson notes that Aristotle ranked temperance, along with justice and courage, as virtues that are always and everywhere required of anyone we would call good.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual self-discipline is the aspect of the virtue of temperance that moderates and controls sexual desire. In *The Courage to Be Chaste*, the priest-psychologist Benedict Groeschel observes that “sexual self-control is often the weakest link in an individual’s self-control system.”<sup>4</sup>

Although sex is natural and good, not all sex is good. There are good reasons why lust is considered one of the seven deadly sins. Sex can express and deepen faithful love, but it can also be used to betray, abuse, exploit, and do violence to others. Sex can bring the joy of a new life into a family where parents are committed to loving and raising the child, but sex can also create a life that ends in abortion, or a life that comes into a world where there are not parents prepared to provide the nurturing that is every child’s birthright.

Wise societies through the ages have recognized the power of sex to be used for good or ill and the special challenges it presents in the struggle for character. They have therefore treated sex as a serious matter—one requiring ethical judgment, moral boundaries, and social institutions like marriage and family that channel this powerful drive in ways that benefit, rather than harm, individuals and the common good.

### **Sex and Culture**

What happens when a society chooses to treat sex as a trivial matter, not requiring self-regulation, social controls, and prudent guidance? Joseph Daniel Unwin was an Oxford and Cambridge University social anthropologist who investigated this question.

In his 1934 book *Sex and Culture*, Unwin reported his study of 80 primitive tribes and six known civilizations through 5,000 years of history. He found a clear positive correlation between the cultural achievement of a people and the sexual restraint they practiced.<sup>5</sup> Aldous Huxley, in his introduction to a subsequent (unfinished) book by Unwin, praised *Sex and Culture* as “a work of the highest importance”:

Unwin's conclusions, which are based upon an enormous wealth of carefully sifted evidence, may be summed up as follows. Societies exhibiting the least amount of energy are those where pre-nuptial continence is not imposed and where the opportunities for sexual indulgence after marriage are greatest. The cultural condition of a society rises in exact proportion as it imposes pre-nuptial and post-nuptial restraints upon sexual opportunity. According to Unwin, after a nation becomes prosperous it becomes increasingly liberal with regard to sexual morality and as a result loses its cohesion, its impetus, and its purpose. The process is irreversible, Unwin concluded: The whole of human history does not contain a single instance of a group becoming civilized unless it has been absolutely monogamous, nor is there any example of a group retaining its culture after it has adopted less rigorous customs.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Sexual Revolution**

In the twentieth century, historical wisdom about sex was swept aside by the sexual revolution, still making its way around the world. It hit the U.S. with full force in the 1960s and 70s. Aided by the birth control pill, the sexual revolution advanced a radical ideology: that people should be free to enjoy sex without the strictures of marriage, without commitment, without love, and even without any personal connection or emotional engagement.

The sexual revolution precipitated a general liberalizing of sexual attitudes and behaviors. Norms disapproving of premarital sex and extramarital sex eroded. In the U.S., Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine led the media in championing the new sexual freedom. The “Playboy philosophy” of recreational sex popularized the idea that casual sex and masturbating with pornography were healthy activities for men. By 1972, according to one estimate, *Playboy* was reaching half of all male professionals.<sup>7</sup>

Hefner cited Alfred Kinsey as the inspiration for his work. Kinsey's 1948 book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*<sup>8</sup> and his 1953 sequel, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*,<sup>9</sup> had shocked America by

seeming to show that all kinds of sexual activities outside marriage were much more common than anyone had imagined. The American Statistical Association pointed out that Kinsey's research was bad science; he had based his conclusions on unrepresentative samples.<sup>10</sup> Three-fourths of his subjects were volunteers; a fourth were prison inmates or ex-convicts. But such criticisms did not deter Kinsey from vigorously promoting his findings, advocating "open marriage," and maintaining that premarital abstinence was psychologically harmful. It was several decades before his oft-cited research was widely discredited as a data source.

The liberalized sexual climate shaped sex education in the schools. Organizations such as SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States; [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)) and Planned Parenthood ([www.plannedparenthoodaction.org](http://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org)) promoted "comprehensive sex education," the approach that quickly came to dominate the field. Few parents were aware that the goal of comprehensive sex education was not to reduce students' sexual activity but rather to prevent the unwanted consequences of "unsafe sex" such as pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. For example, Debra Hafner, a long-serving Executive Director of SIECUS, wrote in her national report that educators should help teens "explore the full range of safe sexual behavior. A partial list of safe sex practices for teens could include: talking, flirting, dancing, hugging, kissing, necking, massaging, caressing, undressing each other, masturbation alone, masturbation in front of a partner, and mutual masturbation."<sup>11</sup> No sexual behavior was off-limits as long as it carried no risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease.

The impact of the sexual revolution was nowhere more evident than in the media and marketplace. Television, movies, magazines, songs, advertising, and children's clothing all became increasingly sexualized. In a commentary on how the marketplace sexualizes children, the writer Amy Welborn noted, "You see it in the racks of clothes for girls from age 7 on—the difficulty of finding an outfit that doesn't scream 'slut.'" One mother flipping through *Teen People* magazine said she was "amazed to find page after page showing young teens dressed in very provocative ways and in very provocative poses." Elementary schoolchildren began to talk enthusiastically about how "Beverly Hills 90210" was their favorite TV show ("Last night's show was a good one," one 8-year-old girl said to her teacher, "because Dylan is smoking pot now and Brandon and Kelly had sex.") A 13-year-old boy told a *New York Times* reporter that his interest in sex began when he watched that show as a third-grader. "The people were cool," he said. "I wanted to try what they were doing."<sup>12</sup>

The character educator James Coughlin characterizes the post-sexual revolution world that children are growing up in: "We socialize kids to have sex. No culture in human history has ever done this to its children."<sup>13</sup>

## Consequences of the Sexual Revolution

The new sexual freedom promised greater happiness. What did it deliver?

There were some positives. Most of us would likely applaud the fact that people in general, including parents and young persons, are now much more comfortable talking about sex than they were prior to the 1960s. Couples having sexual problems in their marriages are more likely to try to get help. Religions today are more likely to emphasize that “sex is the beautiful gift of a good God.” These are all healthy changes.

But along with these positive developments, the new sexual permissiveness set into motion a series of social changes that have carried a very high cost—changes whose consequences continue to unfold and whose full cost to children and society we do not yet know.

One of the first consequences of the new sexual climate was more sexual activity, and at ever-younger ages. In 1960, most American adolescents entered adulthood (age 18) as virgins.<sup>14</sup> That’s no longer true. By the end of the 1980s, more than one in four girls and one in three boys had had sexual intercourse by age 15. Increases in sexual activity were greatest for girls. The proportion of all females aged 15 to 19 who had sexual intercourse rose from 30% in 1971, to 47% in 1982, to 53% in 1988.<sup>15</sup> More recently, the sociologist Christian Smith’s *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, based on a national sample of 18- to 23-year-olds, reported that the mean age for both first oral sex and first intercourse is now 16. The typical never-married American 18- to 23-year-old has had 3 oral sex partners and 3 sexual intercourse partners.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control report data on sexual activity among children as young as 10. On April 2, 2000, *The New York Times* published an article, “The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger,” quoting New York City psychotherapists counseling children, usually girls, who were emotionally distraught because of early sexual involvement. Dr. Allen Waltzman, a Brooklyn psychiatrist, said, “I see girls, 7th- and 8th-graders, even 6th-graders who tell me they’re virgins . . . but they’ve had oral sex 50 or 60 times.”<sup>17</sup>

Stories, better than statistics, convey how the transformed sexual environment has impacted the lives and conduct of children. My wife Judith and I have two sons, now both fathers with children of their own. As Mark and Matthew moved through the elementary and middle school grades in the 1970s and 80s, we saw the sexual environment of the school changing before our eyes. With the sexual revolution in full swing, the heroes and heroines of the popular TV shows had all taken to sleeping around. Observable effects on children soon followed.

One day during sixth grade—the year was 1985—Matthew came home and told us that many of the boys in his class had started to “go with” girls. A few weeks later, he mentioned that these boys and girls were stopping at a park on the way home from school to play “Truth or Dare” in the pine trees. Dares included going to the center of the circle and French-kissing. A few weeks later, Matthew said that several of the boys in his class had announced to their male peers that they were going to have sex with their girlfriends when they got to 7<sup>th</sup>-grade. In 7<sup>th</sup>-grade, Matthew later said, some of these boys made it known that they had carried out their intention.

When I told this story several years later in a parenting talk to an upscale community in central New York, a mother raised her hand and shared with the audience her 9-year-old daughter Susan's recent school experience. When Susan was 8 years old and in third grade, a boy in school kept sending her notes: "I love you, let's have sex." She was disturbed by these notes and showed them to her mother, who showed them to the teacher—who forbade the boy (from a classroom across the hall) to go near Susan for the rest of the school year. But this year, in fourth grade, Susan says that many boys are sending such notes to many girls, and the girls are pleased to get them. Talk about "doing it" is now common at the lunch table. Susan's mother said, "I've asked other mothers if they are aware of the sexual talk and note-passing at school, and I haven't found one who is. The conversation usually ends with the other mother saying, 'We don't talk to our child about sex, and she (or he) doesn't talk to us about it either.'"

Not long after that, in the early 1990s, a friend of mine who was the assistant superintendent of a Pennsylvania suburban school system—the recipient of a national "District of Character" award—wrote to tell me they had just discovered 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boys (11-12 years old) playing a sexual contact game. The object was to earn points by touching girls' private parts, the most points being earned by "going all the way." About a year before, there had been a similar scandal among high schoolers in Los Angeles. Boys at a suburban high school there had formed a "Spur Posse Club" whose members competed to see how many girls they could have sex with. One member claimed 63.

A colleague of mine goes into our county's elementary schools in upstate New York, most of them in small rural communities, to teach 5<sup>th</sup>- and 6<sup>th</sup>-graders about conflict resolution. The children she works with are referred by the principal and are typically having peer relationship problems. Almost always, she says, these 10- and 11-year-olds bring up problems related to sex. She says she talks to them about how to make choices that respect self and others and why saving sex for marriage is the best way to protect your health and your heart. In one discussion with a group of 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girls, most disclosed they had already had sex. One girl began to cry and said, "I've had sex with seven boys—how can I get out of this?" Another girl said she had sex with her boyfriend last year in 5<sup>th</sup>-grade and didn't understand why she was so upset afterwards. She, too, was crying and said, "Why didn't someone tell me not to do this?"

### **More Sex, More Single Mothers and Fatherless Families**

Youth sex, in many cases, results in pregnancy. Three out of ten U.S. teenage girls get pregnant at least once. Approximately 20% of teenagers using condoms as birth control become pregnant after one year.<sup>18</sup> The reasons for the 20% pregnancy rate despite condom use: Condoms sometimes fail; teens fail to use them correctly; and teens don't use them consistently (that is, every time they have intercourse). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, sexually active female teens report a consistent condom use rate of 28%, while sexually active boys report a 47% consistent use rate. Consistent condom use is difficult to achieve among college students, even medical students; among married couples wanting to avoid an unplanned pregnancy; and even among clinic patients already diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease. Comprehensive sex education programs have generally been unsuccessful in their attempts to increase the percentage of sexually active teens who report that they use a condom every time they have sex.<sup>19</sup>

About a third of pregnant teenagers get abortions. About 400,000 give birth each year.<sup>20</sup> Mary, age 18, describes her experience of single motherhood:

I am the mother of a beautiful five-week-old baby. I love my son with all my heart, but I wish I'd had him five years down the road with a man I was married to. The relationship with the guy I was dating was based on sex. We broke up because we had nothing in common but physical attraction. Six weeks later I found out I was pregnant. He said that he would be there for me. He lied. Raising a baby is hard. I have no time to socialize with the few friends I have. What money I have goes to diapers and formula. My son has not seen his father since the day he was born.<sup>21</sup>

In 1960, only one in 20 U.S. children was born to an unmarried mother. By 2010, more than one in four was.<sup>22</sup>

Initially, the increase in nonmarital births among minorities got the most attention. In 1965, three-quarters of African-American children were born to married parents. By 2010, 73% of Black children were born to a single mother (compared to 29% of all Whites). In the major cities such as Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, as many as 90% of Black children were born to unmarried mothers. By 2010, 53% of Hispanic children were also born outside marriage—a percentage that continues to rise.<sup>23</sup>

John Diggs, M.D., is an African-American physician and authority on sexually transmitted infections who speaks to youth about the importance of refraining from premarital sexual activity—for their sake, the sake of the person they're involved with, and the sake of the children that might result from sex. He served on the Experts Panel for our Center's *Smart & Good High Schools* study ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)) of character education in award-winning schools. He had this to say about the consequences that flow from uncommitted sexual relationships that bring children into the world:

If men do not demonstrate full commitment to their children *and* to the women who bear their children, they tend toward irresponsibility in all areas of life. Women and children without committed men are statistically more likely to suffer a whole series of ravages, from physical and sexual abuse to illness and poverty. Skills are not passed on to progeny by the absentee parent. Money is dissipated by individual desires rather than pooled for the family good. Grandparents often have to step in and act as the parents. In the end, unrestrained sex does more damage to the status of minorities than any disease you can name.<sup>24</sup>

In his much-discussed 2012 book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America*, the sociologist Charles Murray revealed that the profound changes in Black and Hispanic families were happening with similar speed and comparable consequences among “working class” Whites. In 1960, nearly four-fifths (84%) of Whites with a high school education married; by 2008, fewer than half (48%) did so. In 1970, only 6% of births to White women with a high school education were outside of marriage. By 2008, 44% were.<sup>25</sup>

Among high-school-educated Whites, Murray reports, fatherless families and serial live-in boyfriends are becoming the new norm. A growing portion of able-bodied men are neither working nor looking for work. Drug abuse and alcoholism continue to rise. Violent crime is five times what it was in 1960. Simultaneously, religiosity has declined—at twice the rate it declined in the general population.<sup>26</sup>



### **The Consequences of Childbearing outside Marriage**

There is now a mountain of evidence documenting, for both mothers and children, the negative consequences of having children outside marriage.

According to the ChildTrends Data Bank,<sup>27</sup> women who give birth outside marriage have lower incomes than married mothers, greater dependence on welfare, and less chance of ever marrying compared to single women who have not had children. Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to grow up in a single-parent household, live in poverty, be abused, be held back in school, have emotional problems, exhibit behavior disorders, and become drug-addicted than children born to married parents.

When children of unmarried parents become teenagers, they are more likely to do poorly in school, drop out of school, engage in sex, and have a child outside marriage. When they become adults, they are more likely to be unemployed, have lower occupational status and income, and have more troubled marriages and divorces.<sup>28</sup>

By the mid-1990s, more than 4 in 10 children in America went to sleep in homes where their fathers did not live. Growing up without a father is now a leading predictor of nearly every childhood and adolescent pathology.<sup>29</sup>

### **Cohabitation's Growing Threat to Children**

Many people are aware that the sexual revolution brought about an increase in adolescent sexual activity, births, and abortions. Fewer people are aware that most of the societal problems associated with nonmarital sex now involve adults. By the end of the 1990s, more than 80% of unwed pregnancies in the U.S. were to women over 20. By comparison, teens under 18 accounted for only 13% of all nonmarital pregnancies.<sup>30</sup>

On February 18, 2013, *The New York Times* announced, in its lead front-page story, that unwed mothers in the United States had for the first time become a *majority* of those women who give birth in their 20s. The opening paragraph stated:

After steadily rising for five decades, the share of children born to unmarried women has crossed a new threshold: more than half of births to American women under 30 occur outside marriage. Once largely limited to poor women and minorities, motherhood without marriage has settled deeply into middle America.

The social forces bringing about this change in the family, the *Times* pointed out, have been both social and economic: The sexual revolution reduced the incentive to wed; cohabitation became the norm; single motherhood lost its social stigma. At the same time, a declining economy has meant fewer jobs of the sort that once enabled blue-collar workers to raise families with a middle-class lifestyle.

"Women used to rely on men, but we don't need to anymore," said a 25-year-old single mother interviewed for the *Times* story. "We support ourselves. We support our kids."

These unmarried mothers described their children as unplanned. Birth control failed; “children happened.” They typically viewed the boyfriends who fathered their children as immature and dependent—as companions and sexual partners. (One woman who had children by two different boyfriends said her first boyfriend was so dependent she had to buy his cigarettes. “It was like living with another kid,” she said.) The thought of marrying these men didn’t enter their minds.

The article went on to indicate that children pay the price of not having two committed parents. One single mother said that between nursing classes and an all-night job at a gas station, she rarely sees her 6-year-old daughter. The girl’s father has children by another woman and rarely lends a hand.

The *Times* article concluded by noting soberly, “Researchers have consistently found that children born outside marriage face elevated risks of falling into poverty, failing in school, and suffering from emotional and behavioral problems.”

What the *Times* described briefly, social science continues to document in detail.

In 2011, a team of eighteen distinguished family scholars associated with the University of Virginia’s National Marriage Project issued a 47-page report, *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*.<sup>31</sup> This third edition of *Why Marriage Matters* reported that “the rapid rise in cohabiting households now represents the greatest unrecognized threat to the welfare of children.” One-quarter of U.S. children are now born to cohabiting couples. Nearly half of all children now spend some part of their childhood in a cohabiting household with an unrelated adult.

The 2011 edition of *Why Marriage Matters* highlighted “five new themes” that emerged since the 2005 edition; all centered on the damaging effects of cohabitation:

1. Children in cohabiting households are much more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children in married families and single-parent families.
2. Cohabiting couples who have a child together are more than twice as likely as married parents to break up before their child turns twelve.
3. Transitions into and out of marriage, cohabitation, and single parenthood—especially multiple transitions—are accompanied by higher rates of children’s loneliness, school failure, behavioral problems, and drug use.
4. American adults and children are now more likely to live in “complex households,” where parents have children by more than one romantic partner. Children who come from these relationships are even more likely to have poor relationships with their parents, experience health and behavior problems, and fail in school.
5. *The nation’s retreat from marriage has hit poor and working-class communities with particular force.* Children from college-educated homes have, in recent decades, seen their family lives stabilize, whereas children from less-educated homes have seen their family lives become increasingly unstable. The United States is devolving into a separate and unequal society.<sup>32</sup>

## Parallel Trends in Other Countries

I am most familiar with these trends in the United States, but there are indicators that the unraveling of the social fabric following the sexual revolution has impacted at least some other countries in similar ways. In *Children of Six Cultures*, Harvard anthropologists Beatrice and Jon Whiting reported that the link between non-intact families and social pathology can be found worldwide.<sup>33</sup> University of Newcastle's Norman Dennis concluded that father absence was the significant factor contributing to a rise in drug abuse and crime in England and Germany.<sup>34</sup>

Permit me to share some data and observations from the British social historian Phillip Blond, author of the 2010 book *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*.<sup>35</sup> Blond writes: "Between 1945 and 1970, it remained overwhelmingly normative for British people to enter marriage. From then on, there was a precipitate fall."

He says multiple factors contributed to the decline in marriage, including "changes in sexual attitudes" and "contraception widely available for the first time." By the 1960s, "Women no longer saw marriage as a necessary step toward child bearing."

Before the 1960s, the proportion of all British children born outside marriage did not exceed 10%. Then it then rose steadily, until by 2008 it had reached 45% (very similar to the figure for the U.S.).

By 2007, about one-quarter of all British nonmarital births were to "lone parents." Another 20% were to cohabiting couples. Nearly half of cohabiting partnerships in the UK, Blond says, break up before their first child's fifth birthday (vs. 8% for married couples). Blond explains why these trends constitute "a social crisis":

These are serious and unprecedented changes in what should be the most important and enduring relationships in our lives—relationships which shape our existence from childhood, giving us values and identity, guiding our decisions and forming our archetypes for further relationships; relationships which for previous generations would have extended through old age and infirmity. We can see and feel the effects of this crisis all around us—our receding trust in others, the normalization of anti-social behavior, our fear of children in the streets, our political and civic disengagement, spiraling rates of drug and alcohol abuse, and high levels of personal debt and dependency on state income . . .<sup>36</sup>

Here are the statistics for the UK offspring of lone-parent families":

- Such children are 75% more likely to fail at school.
- They are 70% more likely to become drug addicts.
- They are 50% more likely to become alcohol-dependent.
- They constitute 70% of all young offenders.
- Girls from fatherless families are overrepresented among pregnant teens.
- Boys from fatherless homes are overrepresented in criminal gangs.<sup>37</sup>

Blond's book argues that marriage and family are social justice issues. He cites the work of the UK's Centre for Social Justice, which coined the term "broken Britain" to refer to the far-reaching destructive impact of marriage and family breakdown. Just as the U.S. report *Why Marriage Matters* found that America's poor and working-class families have suffered the most from the nation's retreat from marriage, Britain's Centre for Justice argues that the weakening of marriage and the family in the UK has had "a particularly acute impact on those living in the bottom 20% of society."

The toll taken by the weakening of marriage and family, Blond argues, has been greatly exacerbated by an economy increasingly unfavorable to the working class and poor. In an August 24, 2011 *New York Times* op-ed column about the widespread rioting England had just experienced, Blond noted that mostly unemployed young males from the bottom segment of society had carried out the criminal looting.<sup>38</sup> He pointed out that in 1976, the lower half of the British population had 12% of “liquid wealth”; by 2003, their share had fallen to 1%. “The erosion of family structures,” Blond wrote, “has been accompanied by a similar libertarian assault from the economic right. Under the rhetoric of free markets, a state has developed that has concentrated wealth and stripped millions of ordinary Britons of their capital, denying them a path to assets, ownership and trade.”<sup>39</sup>

University of California at Berkeley public policy professor Robert Reich, in his book *Aftershock: The Next Economy and American's Future*, cites similar economic trends for the U.S. Blond's analysis also calls to mind the *New York Times* article on the growth of marriage-less families in the U.S. where mothers express little interest in wedding their underemployed male companions who have no economic future. Arguably, jobs that make men more viable marriage partners will need to be part of any long-term societal solution to strengthening marriage and the family. A more just economic system that serves the common good is one way to try to reverse the damage done by the sexual revolution's weakening of marriage.

### **Abortions, STDs, and the Psychological Consequences of the Sexual Revolution**

**Abortions.** As societies impacted by the sexual revolution became more liberal in their sexual practices, they also liberalized their abortion laws. After the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 legalization of abortion through all nine months of pregnancy, abortion in America became a readily available way of terminating an unintended life resulting from sex. The U.S. national annual abortion rate soon exceeded a million a year. School health education programs with the intellectual honesty to treat the controversial abortion issue fully and fairly now faced the challenge of teaching the biological facts about fetal development, the medical facts about what abortion procedures do to the woman and the developing baby, the psychological repercussions many women (and some fathers) experience after abortion, and available alternatives to abortion.

**Sexually transmitted infections (STIs).** The sexual revolution has produced a “silent epidemic” of sexually transmitted infections. According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 20 million new STIs occur in the U.S. population every year. Half occur among young people ages 15 to 24. One in two sexually active single persons will contract at least one STI by age 25. Many will contract several. In the U.S., the cost of this epidemic has reached an estimated \$16 billion a year.<sup>40</sup>

Young women are most at risk for long-term health consequences from STIs. In the U.S., an estimated 24,000 women become infertile each year because of undiagnosed STIs such as chlamydia. Undetected, human papillomavirus (HPV) can cause cervical cancer, taking the lives of about 5,000 American women a year. STIs can also have life-altering consequences for men who contract them. In teaching young people about the impact of these diseases on their present and future lives, we find it helps to give concrete examples. Here is one from the *National Guidelines for Sexuality and Character Education*, developed by the Medical Institute for Sexual Health ([www.medinstitute.org](http://www.medinstitute.org)) in collaboration with our Center and a number of abstinence education organizations:

Larry had not heard of human papilloma virus (HPV) before he had sex with his girlfriend. Soon after, he noticed some small bumps on his penis. His physician told him he had genital warts caused by HPV. The warts did not respond well to acid treatment, laser techniques, or surgery. After protracted unsuccessful treatments, he began to worry if he would ever be able to marry because of the warts.<sup>41</sup>

A good friend, William Boudreau, M.D., was for many years a family physician in our small upstate New York community of 17,000. He says his young male and female patients were often very upset to find out they had a sexually transmitted infection. They'd often say, "How could this happen—we practiced safe sex." Dr. Bill would explain that despite use of a condom, there remains a 15% risk of HIV transmission; a 50% risk of chlamydia; a significant risk of transmitting human papilloma virus, herpes, and syphilis, and so on. That's because the viral and bacterial germs that cause these STIs may infect anywhere in the male or female genital area—and can be transmitted through skin-to-skin and sore-to-sore contact during sex. A second danger is that after what young persons may think is "protected intercourse," potentially infectious sexual fluids are on both sides of a condom and can be transmitted between partners. Many, if not most, young people are not aware of these facts when they make the decision to have what they mistakenly consider "safe sex."

When my wife Judith and I published a small book for teens, *Sex, Love, and You: Making the Right Decision*, Dr. Boudreau wrote the chapter on STIs. He concluded with the following medical and moral advice to young readers about responsibility to self and others. It's ethical counsel that could be part of any character education program that aims to help young people build a positive future for themselves and not endanger the future of anyone they might be romantically involved with:

The sexual practices of the past 40 years have produced a dangerous, invisible epidemic. As a doctor, I would urge you to take good care of yourself—to do everything possible to keep yourself healthy and to maximize your chances, if you intend to marry, of bringing a healthy body to your marriage. If you do, you will not risk infecting your spouse, and you will also protect your ability to bear a child together. The best way to avoid *all risk of all STIs* is to abstain from sex outside marriage.<sup>42</sup>

***Behavioral, psychological, and academic correlates of youth sex.*** For adolescents, whether or not a pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease occurs, sexual activity has been linked to negative behavioral, psychological, and academic outcomes.

Dating violence is five times more likely to occur in teen relationships that involve sex.<sup>43</sup> Statutory rape—defined as a teenager under 16 having sex with a partner three or more years older—is commonplace among sexually experienced young adolescent girls. In the U.S., 41% of sexually experienced 15-year-old girls, 53% of 14-year-old girls, and 65% of girls 13 years or younger report they have experienced statutory rape, with the average age of the partner being more than five years older.<sup>44</sup>

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that most sexually active teens experienced a loss of self-esteem at first intercourse.<sup>45</sup> Sexually experienced teens have been found to be 2.5 to 4 times more likely than virgin teens to be depressed or have suicidal thoughts (Hallfors, et.al. 2004). Two-thirds of teens who have had sex say they wish they had waited.<sup>46</sup>

One study sought to clarify whether teen sexual activity is the cause or the result of depression. It found that among adolescent girls, depression is *not* consistently followed by sexual activity, but sexual activity *is* frequently followed by depression.<sup>47</sup>

A study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that the attempted suicide rate for sexually experienced girls between 12 and 16 was six times higher than for girls that age who had not had sex.<sup>48</sup>

A large body of research indicates that teens who engage in sexual activity are also more likely to become enmeshed in a “problem behavior syndrome” that includes drug and alcohol abuse and crime.<sup>49</sup> Some researchers have suggested that when teens start to have sex, it may indicate that they are taking their cues from risk-taking peers rather than from parents and teachers. In this way, sexual activity may serve as a gateway to other risk-taking behaviors.<sup>50</sup>

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that that teen sex is associated with a higher rate of suspensions and unexcused absences from school, less liking of school, and reduced aspirations to attend college.<sup>51</sup> Sexually active girls and boys are more likely to drop out of school. The academic effects are strongest for boys. A longitudinal study of more than a thousand teens found that as boys became sexually active, their academic performance declined relative to boys who remained virgins. The authors concluded: “To the extent that adolescent premarital sex has long-term effects on academic performance, and to the extent that school performance is a good indicator of success in later life, premarital sex may have far-reaching negative consequences for a male’s future well-being.”<sup>52</sup>

***The impact of pornography.*** No assessment of the sexual revolution’s impact can ignore what has been called “the normalization of pornography.” Aided by the Internet, pornography has become ubiquitous. Books such as *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*<sup>53</sup> have documented pornography’s pervasive role in creating a toxic sexual culture that sexualizes children. A Netvalue Report on Minors found that by the turn of the century, U.S. youth under 17 were spending 65% more time on adult pornography Internet sites than they did on game sites. Four of the ten who had visited a pornographic site were girls. In a 2010 survey of English schoolchildren, almost a third said their first exposure to Internet pornography was at age 10 year or younger.

In October 2015, the American College of Pediatricians ([www.acped.org/](http://www.acped.org/)) issued *The Impact of Pornography on Children*, a summary of the growing scientific literature on the damage done by pornography. In youth, the consumption of pornography is linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, violent behavior, early sexual debut, sexual promiscuity, higher rates of teen pregnancy, and a distorted view of relationships.

In the same month, the Australia-based MercatorNet ([www.MercatorNet.com](http://www.MercatorNet.com)) published “Porn is Harmless? Think Again.”<sup>54</sup> Sexting is more common among teens who consume pornography, as is the belief that sexual promiscuity is normal. College students who viewed pornographic material for six weeks, compared to matched students who didn’t, became interested in more extreme forms of pornography, considered rape less of a crime, and were more accepting of sexual infidelity. In another study, men who consumed pornography were more likely to believe that women cause rape or enjoy sexual assault.

Among adults, pornography has been linked to a higher rate of divorce. The more a woman perceives her husband or boyfriend to be using pornography, the more negatively she rates their relationship. Neural changes in the brains of pornography users have been found to be similar to the changes seen in brains of persons addicted to cocaine, alcohol, and methamphetamines. Some brain studies have found pornography consumption to be associated with decreased brain volume and lower functional connectivity. (See Mercator's "Porn Is Harmless?" article for citations of these studies.)

The "Porn Is Harmless?" research review also reports that children and teens exposed to pornography are at risk of acting out adult sexual acts they have seen. Given the paucity of public discourse about pornography, many people are likely to underestimate its effects on the minds and behavior of young consumers. A colleague who directs an ethics center recounted his conversation with a junior high school student who "spoke enthusiastically about all the pornography he watches with his friends. All kinds of sex—oral sex, anal sex, you name it. He says he and his friends play 'Truth or Dare,' in which they perform the sexual acts they've watched on each other."

Some years ago, PBS television aired a program titled "The Lost Children of Rockdale County." It described an outbreak of 200 cases of syphilis among teens in an affluent Atlanta suburb. Investigating health officials found that these adolescents, some as young as 13, had been gathering together after school to watch the Playboy cable TV channel, making a game of imitating what they saw. "They tried almost every permutation of sexual activity imaginable—vaginal, oral, anal, girl on girl, several boys with a single girl, or several girls with a boy."<sup>55</sup>

The parents of these teens, when interviewed, turned out to be typical suburban soccer moms and dads who coached their children's teams, went on vacations together, and the like. What seemed to be missing, however, was an effort by parents to transmit strong beliefs and values. Instead, these parents spoke in ways that were bland and non-directive. One mother said, "They have to make decisions, whether to take drugs, to have sex. I can give them my opinion, but they have to decide for themselves."<sup>56</sup> Such children are being raised by the culture, not their parents. Their parents have become ethical bystanders.

A final story, this from Kathleen Parker, a syndicated columnist who writes about culture and character. As with the PBS program on teens watching and imitating the Playboy channel, it causes us ask, Where are the parents?

At a skating rink in a southern city, a father stopped to pick up his 11-year-old daughter. In the center of the darkened rink were 40 or 50 children, all about his daughter's age or younger, forming a circle. As the father drew closer, he could see that in the center of the circle were several boys and girls acting out positions of simulated sex. Several boys made sandwiches of little girls. One boy stood behind a girl, his arms around her and his hands on her genital area. The surrounding circle of kids watched in fascination. The father says that when they saw him approaching, a few straggled away, but most showed no embarrassment. When he reported all this to the rink manager, his response was that no one else had complained, that "dirty dancing" was not allowed in his rink, but that in the future he would increase the lighting. Then he added, "But it's a different world."<sup>57</sup>

And one last datum: In this new sexual world, children are more likely to sexually assault other children. Increases in children-on-children sexual abuse had been reported even before the recent findings on pornography's role. Not long after the sexual revolution was underway, mental health practitioners began to report a rise in sexual abuse of children by other children, and at younger ages. The age of the perpetrators has decreased, along with the age of the victims. Said one New York City psychiatrist, "When I first got involved [in the mid-1970s], the average age of the victims was 12. Now it is 8."<sup>58</sup>

Cultural outcomes such as these have led a number of scholars to conclude that "the large-scale behavioral and normative transformation in American sexual behavior is implicated in the breakdown of family life in the United States, among other social ills."<sup>59</sup> Surveying the current sexual and social landscape, the essayist William Schickel puts it more strongly: "Chastity, like honesty, is a civic as well as a personal virtue. When a society loses chastity, it begins to destroy itself."<sup>60</sup>

### **What Can Character Education Do?**

There is now a broad medical and social science consensus about the negative consequences of youthful sexual activity. There is also growing recognition of what ought to be obvious: that the problems associated with uncommitted sexual relationships—such as unwed pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, emotional wounds, diminished achievement, single parenthood, fatherless families, all the ills that go with poverty, and the myriad problems associated with unstable cohabitating families—don't disappear after the teens. These are all problems for adults as well.

It's also obvious that character education, by itself, can't reverse the tide of something as powerful and pervasive as the sexual revolution, any more than it can singlehandedly solve the other formidable social-moral problems that confront us. Social institutions at every level—the family, our schools, our faith communities, youth groups, the health care professions, universities, local government, the national government, and the media—all have a role to play.

Attitudes and behaviors can change. Healthy cultures have the capacity for self-correction. It remains to be seen whether modern societies have the will and wherewithal to try to reverse the problematic trends set in motion by the sexual revolution and to protect children from the damaging effects of a highly sexualized environment.

For me, it helps to think of our task as one of taking modest but meaningful steps to build a more virtuous sexual counterculture. A counterculture that unabashedly ties sex to character—to virtues such as wisdom, self-control, genuine respect for self and others, taking responsibility for one's actions, the courage to resist sexual pressures, modesty in speech and action, a future orientation that postpones short-term gratification for the sake of higher, long-term goals (like finding the right mate), and the capacity for the self-giving love required for successful marriage and parenting.

The good news is that, at least by some indicators, there is some cultural movement in the direction of greater sexual wisdom and restraint. The annual federal Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates that teen sex, teen pregnancies, teen births, and teen abortions are all significantly lower than their highs in the early 1990s. In 2001, the percentage of high-school age teens who said they had never had sexual intercourse became a majority (54.4%) for the first time in 25 years—and has remained a



slight majority since then. Moreover, one-third of those high schoolers who have had intercourse say they are “currently abstinent.” Although some aspects of the sexual culture may be getting worse or not improving— a hook-up culture on college campuses, the pervasiveness of pornography, more children growing up in cohabiting households—we ought not to ignore the rays of hope on the horizon.

How could character education be part of helping to build a healthier sexual culture in the century ahead and, in our schools and families, educating for character in the sexual domain? Let me close by describing ten things I think we can do. Most of them, I think, would be able to win support across a large part of the ideological spectrum. Most have already been done in some places with documented success.

**1. Make ethical sexuality—applying virtues to the sexual domain—part of character education.** We can begin by teaching what wise societies have always known: Sex is powerful. Because it is powerful, it calls for guidance by virtues such as self-control, self-respect, and respect for others. Because it has profound consequences for self, others, and society, sexual behavior is a moral matter. Like all other human behaviors that affect human welfare, sex calls for ethical evaluation.

*Ethical sexuality*—making sexual decisions that have positive rather than negative consequences for the health and welfare of self and others—should therefore be considered an important part of good character. It follows that helping students apply virtues to the sexual area of their lives must be an integral part of character education. In the process, as Kevin Ryan has pointed out, we can help students learn to see sexual self-discipline and all that that involves as a positive opportunity—a means of developing their character and preparing themselves for a deep, loving relationship as an adult. In that spirit, the *Loving Well* curriculum created some years ago by Kevin Ryan, Steve Ellenwood, and colleagues at Boston University had teens read and discuss high-quality literature—including short stories, essays, and poems—that dealt with romance, love, commitment, and marriage, and found that students who experienced this program were significantly more likely than a comparison group to agree with statements supporting the value of abstaining from sexual activity outside a committed love relationship.<sup>61</sup>

**2. Support parents as their children’s primary sex educators.** We can encourage and actively support parents in their role as their children’s first and most important sex educators. We should let them know what the research shows: Parents make a difference in this as in every other area of their children’s development. For example, mothers who communicate that they disapprove of their teens’ engaging in sex have teens who delay sexual involvement.<sup>62</sup> Fathers who convey that message and are emotionally close to their children have the same effect.<sup>63</sup>

We can put materials in the hands of parents that help them jump-start a conversation with their child about sex. Parents have found an article such as “10 Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement,” using true stories from the lives of teens, helpful in this regard. Many parents want to teach their children that sex is about much more than the body—the whole person is involved—but they struggle to explain how premature sex can do emotional harm and they fall back on vague generalities such as “You’re too young” or “You’re not ready.” We can offer parents (and teachers) a language for naming and discussing the very real emotional consequences of relationships that involve sex.

There are schools that exemplify how to honor the role of parents in forming the sexual values and consciences of their children. One example: Twenty years ago, the public schools of Pittsfield, Massachusetts adopted an elementary school human sexuality program called LAMO (Learning About Myself and Others) that parents and their children took together. The program is voluntary. Parents and children attend classes together at the school. The number of sessions ranged from one per year for first and second grades to four sessions per year for fifth and sixth grades. During each session, parents sat next to their own children. When the teacher posed a question to the class, each child answered it working with his or her parent. Parents helped children clear up misunderstandings and added their own perspectives. Following each session, parents were given take-home materials for further discussion with their child. Parents said the program helped them communicate openly with their children as they moved through the secondary school years. The pregnancy rate for students who, as elementary schoolers, participated with their parents in LAMO remained near zero throughout their middle school and high school years.

**3. Help families deal with the challenges presented by the media.** A reality that schools are only beginning to come to grips with is that children today are growing up immersed from their earliest years in a media-saturated environment, one that is, in many respects, subversive of both intellectual and moral development. According to the study *Kids and the Media at the New Millennium*, two-thirds of U.S. children between 8 and 13 have their own TVs in their bedrooms. At the turn of the century, youth between 8 and 18 consumed, on average, 6 hours and 43 minutes of electronic media a day.<sup>64</sup>

Here, too, we should share with parents what the research shows. “There are dozens of well-designed studies,” says one researcher, “that show that TV, movies, and other media affect what viewers believe and how they behave.”<sup>65</sup> A study in *Science* magazine reported that teenage boys and girls who watch more than three hours of television a day are four times more likely as adults to fight or assault another person, compared to teens who watch less than an hour a day. This difference held regardless of whether the teens came from stable middle-class homes or low-income families with a history of childhood neglect.<sup>66</sup> Recent research has found that the higher the level of young persons’ exposure to sexually titillating television content, the more likely they are to be sexually active. Desensitization is another problem. After repeated viewing of films portraying violence against women, often in a sexual context, college males said they enjoyed the material more and expressed less sympathy for victims of rape.<sup>67</sup>

Schools can help parents exercise appropriate guidance and control over their children’s use of media. The stories I shared earlier in this paper illustrate the potential of even *one* TV show to sexualize children in unhealthy ways. Some principals have sent a letter home with examples of how children bring into the school environment the language, attitudes, and actions they hear or see on television. One elementary school principal wrote parents that children get along better in school and concentrate better when they watch less TV and don’t watch programs that model negative behavior. She asked parents to consider setting these limits: for children 7 and younger, no more than a half hour of television a day; for children 8 and up, no more than an hour a day. She also included a list of recommended shows she thought wholesome for elementary schoolchildren and another list of programs not recommended. Many parents expressed gratitude for the principal’s letter; it gave them a basis for being more pro-active and authoritative in this area. Some schools have sent home “media guidelines for your consideration that other families have found helpful.”

The school can communicate that many parents have found it very helpful to sit down with their children—starting in the early years—and create a framework for formulating family media guidelines by saying something like the following:

The use of the media in the family is a privilege, not a right. That privilege has to be exercised in a way that is consistent with our values as a family. So for any particular TV show, movie, video game, CD, Internet site, or social media, here's the question: Is it consistent with what we value and believe as a family?

In all these ways, schools can encourage parents not to be carried along passively by the culture but to take a stand for what they believe.

**4. Teach media literacy in the school.** This includes helping students think critically about their own media habits and learning to think critically about all the forms of media they consume. There are many good media literacy websites (e.g., [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)) that teach students to ask questions such as “Who created this message and why are they sending it?” “What values and viewpoints are represented?” “What is left out?” With regard to sex, media literacy education can ask students questions such as, “Do TV and movies portray sex realistically—the way it is in real life? Make a list of the consequences that are rarely, if ever, portrayed.” (Consequences seldom shown: unmarried pregnancy, fatherless families, children growing up in poverty, abortion and its aftermath, sexually transmitted diseases, infertility, and emotional consequences like as depression and loss of self-worth.) A growing body of research finds that well-designed media literacy instruction, ranging from workshops to full courses, has been effective in helping youth think critically about risk behaviors and learn to deconstruct media messages that can contribute to unhealthy behaviors.<sup>68</sup>

Media literacy can also fortify our children against pornography. We should share, with both students and their parents, what the research shows regarding pornography's negative effects on sexual attitudes, behavior, and psychological health. Many middle and high schools use, sometimes as part of a course on character development, the teen-friendly books of Sean Covey (son of the famous Stephen Covey): *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teenagers* and *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make*. Both treat pornography in a very candid way as part of a broader discussion of addictions that can take over one's life. In both books, Covey makes effective use of examples taken from the lives of young people.

**5. Help schools understand the different approaches to sexuality education and decide what approach is most aligned with the philosophy and goals of character education.** Currently, three approaches compete for adoption by schools. The *risk reduction* approach, also called comprehensive sex education (CSE), argues that most teenagers are going to have sex and that their sexual activity is not necessarily problematic in and of itself. Rather, the risk reduction model defines the problem as the pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease consequences of youth sexual activity. It therefore sees providing information about and access to contraceptive devices, along with information about sexually transmitted infections, as the best solution.

The second approach is the *risk avoidance* model, also called abstinence education. It emphasizes primary prevention by encouraging risk avoidance through abstinence from unmarried sexual activity, including oral and anal sex as well as vaginal intercourse. Abstinence educators teach that being responsible means not risking the physical and psychological harms to self or others (such as

pregnancy, disease, and emotional repercussions such as lowered self-esteem and depression) involved in unmarried sexual activity. In teaching risk avoidance, abstinence education takes an approach similar to that of other areas of health and wellness education such as drug education. Recognizing that illegal drugs are harmful to self and society, health educators teach students all the reasons why they should avoid their use and strategies for doing so. Because abstinence education encourages students to make sexual choices that are objectively in the best interest of self, others, and society, it is arguably the approach most aligned with the goals of character education. The risk avoidance approach is also recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in its *Guidelines for Effective School Health Education to Prevent the Spread of AIDS*:

School systems should make programs available that will enable and encourage young people who have not engaged in sexual intercourse to continue to abstain from sexual intercourse until they are ready to establish a mutually monogamous relationship within the context of marriage. For young people who have engaged in sexual intercourse, school programs should enable and encourage them to stop engaging in sexual intercourse until they are ready to establish a mutually monogamous relationship within the context of marriage.<sup>69</sup>

In recent years, some educators have advocated a third approach—a combination of the risk reduction and risk avoidance strategies. The premise is that both strategies are needed and compatible—can be presented side by side, with positive effects. Critics of this approach have argued that it sends a mixed moral message (“Don’t have sex, but here’s a way to reduce the risks if you do”) and that although combination programs claim to emphasize both abstinence and contraceptive strategies, in practice they commonly focus on risk reduction strategies and treat abstinence superficially. (We’ll look at some studies on the combination approach below.)

**6. Help schools choose a program that is not only philosophically aligned with character education but also has evidence of effectiveness.** What does the research show about “what works” in sex education? This is hotly debated. Schools trying to find a clear answer should be prepared to find that different reviews of the research have reached different conclusions. Several reviewers have concluded that the risk reduction/comprehensive sex education model has been effective in achieving its goal of promoting increased (though not consistent) condom use, whereas abstinence education has not been not successful in achieving its goal of reducing teen sex. The media have widely reported this claim.

Other researchers, however, have countered by pointing out that *poorly designed* abstinence education programs—ones that are, for example, too short to have much impact—have in fact been ineffective, but that *well-designed* programs have both delayed the onset of sexual activity and led significant numbers of sexually active students to stop. Wilcox gives examples of these various reviews of the research,<sup>70</sup> as do Weed and Lickona in their 2014 chapter, “Abstinence Education in Context: History, Evidence, Premises, and Comparison to Comprehensive Sexuality Education.”<sup>71</sup> In that chapter, we identify eight peer-reviewed abstinence education studies showing significant reductions in teen sex. Some examples:

1. The ***Heritage Keepers Abstinence Education*** study used a large sample size ( $n=1,535$ ), matched comparison group, and a 12-month follow-up. Designed for middle and high schools, Heritage Keeper is presented in 45 minute class periods over 10 consecutive school days or in 90-minute sessions for 5 consecutive school days. The curriculum’s lessons are

intended to influence scientifically derived “cognitive mediators” believed to be causal mechanisms affecting teens’ decision to abstain and the ability to live out that decision.

For example, the curriculum addresses common “*justifications for sex*” (one cognitive mediator) by listing typical reasons teens give for initiating sex and by providing alternative arguments. Students practice these arguments in directed role plays in which they alternate playing someone engaging in sex outside marriage, someone effectively resisting those arguments, and a third person encouraging the resistance. These exercises are designed to increase “*abstinence efficacy*” (teens’ confidence that they are able to abstain, a second cognitive mediator).

“Future impact of sex” (a third mediator) is emphasized through interactive activities that help students make a personal connection between the possible consequences of sexual activity and the plans they have for their future. They are also given data about the benefits to a couple and any children they may have, of raising a family within a long-term legal and ethical commitment. The development of students’ “*abstinence values*” (a fourth cognitive mediator) is fostered by class discussions differentiating between short-term infatuation and lasting love. Heritage Keepers teachers are selected on the basis of their ability to relate well to students, and their commitment to live by the message they are teaching. The evaluation found that program students were about half as likely as the comparison group to initiate sexual intercourse after one year ( $p < .001$ ). This study was replicated with a larger sample and produced similar results.

2. A 2008 evaluation of the ***Reasons of the Heart*** abstinence curriculum found that adolescent students who were virgins and received the program were about half as likely as the matched comparison group to initiate sexual activity after one year ( $p < .05$ ).
3. In a 2006 study conducted by Princeton University’s John Jemmott, African-American youth (ages 10-15) were randomly assigned to one of four interventions: (1) abstinence only, (2) safer-sex, (3) a program that combined safer-sex and abstinence, and (4) a general “health-promotion” program that served as the control-group. Teens who experienced the abstinence only intervention were significantly less likely to report ever having sexual intercourse at a 24-month follow-up than those in the safer-sex intervention, the combined safer-sex and abstinence intervention, or the control group ( $p = .05$ ). Teens in the abstinence program who did start having sex were no less likely than those in the other groups to use condoms.
4. A 2001 study in the *Journal of Health Communications* found that after a 5-year mass communications program in Monroe County, New York called ***Not Me, Not Now***, there was a 32% reduction in the percent of teens under 16 who had experienced sex ( $p < .05$ ). The adolescent pregnancy rate for Monroe County dropped from 63.4% in 1993 to 49.5% in 1996. Similar counties in New York not exposed to this campaign did not experience a comparable decline in the teen pregnancy rate ( $p < .01$ ).

5. A 2010 *Promoting Health Among Teens* study compared behavioral outcomes using four approaches: abstinence-only, safer-sex (contraception focus), combined approach (abstinence and safer sex), and an untreated control group. Two years later, students in the abstinence-only cohort initiated sex at a significantly lower rate than in any of the other cohorts.

In the Weed-Lickona chapter, we argue that a close examination of the evidence shows that the risk reduction and combination approaches have thus far not achieved their claimed levels of success in reducing teen pregnancies or STIs or even the more modest intermediate goal of getting sexually active teens to use condoms consistently. By contrast, well-designed abstinence education programs—those that provide adequate dosage, target important mediating causal mechanisms, and utilize teachers who believe in the message—have achieved significant reductions in teen sexual activity that are still evident a year or more later.

**7. Help students develop the ethical reasoning needed to answer the question, “What if I use protection—doesn’t that make sex responsible?”** Young people will have heard it said, “If you do have sex, be responsible and protect yourself and your partner.” But does using a condom really make unmarried sex a “responsible” act? To help students develop the moral reasoning that sees the problems with this line of thinking, a teacher can use the following Socratic questioning:

*Does premarital sex carry any risks for self and others? Yes.*

*What are those risks? Pregnancy; more than 25 STDs; the possibility of future infertility due to an STD; and emotional consequences such as regret, guilt, lowered self-esteem, and depression.*

*Are these serious risks? Yes.*

*Do condoms eliminate these risks? No. They provide less than complete protection against pregnancy, only partial protection against STDs, and no protection against emotional consequences.*

*Is it ever morally responsible to take serious, unnecessary risks with your own or someone else’s health, life, and emotional welfare? It’s not.*

**8. We can encourage students to consider marriage and family as life goals.** This helps to foster a future orientation that contributes to better sexual decision-making in the present. Elayne Bennett, creator of the Best Friends and Best Men programs for inner-city youth, says her programs “help young people see what a good marriage looks like through married role model speakers.” High school courses on marriage and parenting have made use of the University of Virginia’s National Marriage Project ([www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/](http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/)), where students can find research-based recommendations such as:

- Consider making marriage a top goal for your life. Married people are healthier, wealthier, and happier.

- Wait to have a child until after you are married and at least 20 years old. The children of unwed parents face greater risks of depression, drug abuse, dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, being poor, and committing suicide.
- Think twice before you decide to live with someone outside of marriage. Living together before marriage is linked to a less satisfying marriage and a higher chance of divorce.

Such courses teach students that success at marriage and parenting takes character—a constellation of virtues such as sacrificial love, commitment, fidelity, perspective-taking, generosity, honesty, fairness, adaptability, patience, endurance, forgiveness, and a sense of humor. Then students actually work on developing their own character, choosing the virtues they think they most need to work on and making and carrying out a plan for self-improvement.

**9. We can encourage students to make use of all their intellectual resources, including their faith traditions, when they make sexual decisions.** Wallace and Williams summarize the relationship between adolescent religiosity and sexual activity: "Attendance at religious services, self-rated importance of religion, and denominational affiliation have all been found to relate significantly to lower levels of sexual involvement. On average, highly religious adolescents initiate sex later, have fewer sexual partners, and have sex less often than their nonreligious peers. Accordingly, they are less at risk of experiencing the negative physical and social health problems associated with early sexual involvement."<sup>72</sup>

Many students, however, are not aware of what their faith tradition teaches about sex. Here are three examples, drawn from different religious traditions, that I've shared with students—and that support what social science is revealing about the wisdom of saving sex for the committed love relationship of marriage:

*Rabbi Isaac Frank:* "Rabbinic teaching for at least 2500 years has consistently opposed premarital sex. Judaism removes sexual intercourse from any context of selfishness or primitive lust, and enshrines it as a sanctified element in the most intimate and meaningful relationship between two human beings. Within the sacred marriage bond, sexual relations are not only permissible; they are in fact the fulfillment of the divine command."

*Father Richard McCormick, Catholic priest:* "The promise of two people to belong always to each other makes it possible for lovemaking to mean total giving and total receiving. It is the totality of married life that makes sexual intercourse meaningful. This is why the Church refers to sexual intercourse as 'the marital act.'"

*Muzammil H. Siddiqi, Islamic teacher:* "Islam views sexual love as a gift from God. It is a sign of God's love and mercy and is given to human beings for their good and well-being. Islam limits sexual activity to a man and a woman within the bond of marriage. It is permitted only to those couples who have joined themselves in a lawful marriage."

**10. The sexual environment of the school should support what it is trying to teach in the curriculum.** Dress should be modest. Public displays of affection should not be permitted. Same for sexual talk in corridors and classrooms. Sadly, in many schools, the air is thick with sex talk. A nurse who does substitute teaching in a central New York, for example, said high school students would often come into health class "talking and joking openly about their sexual activities—who was doing

what with whom, what went on the night before, and so on.” Many administrators turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to such goings-on because they feel it’s a losing battle. But it’s a battle other schools have won. Schools, as many of us have seen, can shape their culture if they make it a priority. Well, that’s a sample of what we can do if we’re willing to tackle this challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Williams, “Ethical Sexuality,” in T. Devine et al. (Eds.), *Cultivating Heart and Character: Educating for Life’s Most Essential Goals*. (Chapel Hill, NC: Character Development Publishing, 2000.)

<sup>2</sup> J.Q. Wilson, *The moral sense*. (New York: Free Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nichomachean ethics*. Trans. David Ross. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Groeschel, *The Courage to Be Chaste*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture*. {London: Oxford University Press, 1934.}

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, quoted in “Joseph D. Unwin,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>7</sup> Judith A. Reisman, *Kinsey: Crimes and Consequences* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Media Education, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Ward B. Pomery, and C. E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders; Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1953).

<sup>10</sup> W.G. Cochran, et al., *Statistical Problems of the Kinsey Report on Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. (Washington D.C.: The American Statistical Association., 1954.)

<sup>11</sup> Debra Hafner, “Safe Sex in Teens,” *SIECUS Report* (September/October, 1988), p. 9. See also SIECUS’s *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten-12th Grade* (New York: SIECUS).

<sup>12</sup> A. Jarrell, “The face of teenage sex grows younger,” *The New York Times* (April 2, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> James Coughlin, keynote address, Summer Institute in Character Education, State University of New York at Cortland, June 25, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, *A scientific review of abstinence and abstinence programs: Technical Assistance Module*. 2008. Retrieved at <http://reengageinc.org/research/ScientificReviewof%20abstinence.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute ([www.guttmacher.org](http://www.guttmacher.org)), 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> A. Jarrell, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Centers for Disease Control, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> For research supporting these findings on pregnancies despite condom use and inconsistency of condom use in various groups studied, see Stan Weed and Thomas Lickona, “Abstinence Education in Context: History, Evidence, Premises, and Comparison to Comprehensive Sex Education,” in Maureen Kenny (Ed.), *Sex Education* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Lickona, “Stages of Moral Reasoning and Sexual Decision-Making,” unpublished paper, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, State University of New York at Cortland, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> ChildTrends Data Bank, Births to Unmarried Women: Indicators on Children and Youth (report), 2012.

Retrieved from [http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/sites/default/files/75\\_Births\\_to\\_Unmarried\\_Women.pdf](http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/sites/default/files/75_Births_to_Unmarried_Women.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> ChildTrends Data Bank, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> John Diggs, “Sex Without Marriage Often Ruins People’s Lives,” *Omaha World Herald* (October 19, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. (New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Murray, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> ChildTrends Data Bank, 2012. 24

<sup>28</sup> ChildTrends Data Bank, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting our most urgent social problem* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> John R. Williams, “Ethical Sexuality,” in T. Devine et al. (Eds.), *Cultivating Heart and Character: Educating for Life’s Most Essential Goals*.

<sup>31</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, et al. *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (3rd. edition). (New York, NY: Institute for American Values, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Wilcox, 2011.



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- <sup>33</sup> Beatrice and Jon Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
- <sup>34</sup> Norman Dennis, "Europe's Rise in Crime," *The World and I* (October, 1997), p. 28.
- <sup>35</sup> Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*. (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 2010).
- <sup>36</sup> Blond, 2010.
- <sup>37</sup> Blond.
- <sup>38</sup> Phillip Blond, "England's Riotous Values," *The New York Times* (August 24, 2011).
- <sup>39</sup> Blond's view of how the political left and right share the blame for social, economic, and moral decline has stirred debate on both sides of the Atlantic. *New York Times* op-ed columnist David Brooks, arguing that the U.S. is also a "broken society," summarized Blond's thesis sympathetically: "He argues that over the past generation we have witnessed two revolutions, both of which liberated the individual and decimated local associations. First, there was a revolution from the left: a cultural revolution that displaced traditional manners and mores; a legal revolution that emphasized individual rights instead of responsibilities . . . Then there was the market revolution from the right. In the age of deregulation, giant chains like Wal-Mart decimated local shop owners. Global financial markets took over small banks. Unions withered. The two revolutions talked the language of individual freedom, but they perversely ended up creating greater centralization. They created an atomized, segmented society and then the state had to come in and attempt to repair the damage. The free-market revolution didn't create the pluralistic decentralized economy. It created a centralized financial monoculture, which requires a gigantic government to audit its activities. The effort to liberate individuals from repressive social constraints didn't produce a flowering of freedom; it weakened families, increased out-of-wedlock births, and turned neighbors into strangers" (*The New York Times*, March 18, 2010).
- <sup>40</sup> Weed & Lickona, 2014.
- <sup>41</sup> *National guidelines for sexuality and character education*. (Austin, TX: Medical Institute for Sexual Health, 1996).
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- <sup>49</sup> S. Armour & Dana L. Haynie, Sexual Debut and Delinquency, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36, 2007, 141-152.
- <sup>50</sup> Armour & Haynie.
- <sup>51</sup> John Sabia, "Reading, Writing, and Sex: The Effect of Losing Virginity on Academic Performance," *Economic Inquiry*, cited in Wilcox, 2008.
- <sup>52</sup> John Billy et al., "Effects of Sexual Activity on Adolescent Social and Psychological Development," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 151, 1988, 190-212.
- <sup>53</sup> Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2005).
- <sup>54</sup> <http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/porn-is-harmless-think-again/17075#sthash.iVtPKEiY.dpuf>
- <sup>55</sup> Kay S. Hymowitz, "Parenting: The Lost Art," *American Educator* (Spring, 2001).
- <sup>56</sup> Hymowitz.
- <sup>57</sup> Kathleen Parker, "Even Children Corrupted By Society's Sex Obsession," *Orlando Sentinel* (April 1, 1999).
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- <sup>59</sup> Wilcox, 2008; see also Sara McLanahan, "Diverging destinies: How children fare under the second demographic transition," *Demography*, 2004, 41(4), 607-627.
- <sup>60</sup> William Schickel, "The Case for Chastity, a Civic Virtue." *The Ithaca Journal*, November 13, 1991, p. 18.
- <sup>61</sup> The Loving Well Project, [www.bu.edu/education/lovingwell](http://www.bu.edu/education/lovingwell).
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