

# Commentary

## TEENAGE SEX



*In the Reagan, years there was both a war on drugs and a war on providing sexual information in schools. After a lot of editing, the attached editorial was broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio and selectively distributed through National Public Radio. Our nonprofit organization actually received a grant to produce the attached poster which can still be freely downloaded on the ERC website ([envrc.org](http://envrc.org)) in the original or modernized format. Both versions are downloaded with frequency from our website by schools, particularly around prom time.*

It's hard to think of sex as a "disease" which needs to be addressed. Yet sex absolutely may harm young people and that's how those of us in health care define disease.

Social scientists have made a clear case that adolescent sexuality is dangerous. Children having children causes physical, psychological, and quality of life hazards. It's not hard to understand why we have over a million teenage pregnancies each year. We know that girls are reaching puberty at earlier ages. This probably has to do with better nutrition and health care. We also know from our research that almost all teenage pregnancies result from "monogamous filial relationships." In English, that means the people who have sex often really care for each other—perhaps we could even say, are in love.

In interviewing thousands of young people who were part of unplanned pregnancies, researchers have asked, "why?" Some said they just didn't know they could create pregnancy but at a deeper level most have communicated something more subtle and more troubling. Technically, they knew what could happen but they couldn't come to accept that something that seemed so warm, loving, and natural could hurt them.

To best understand, dust off your memories and especially the feelings of your teenage Friday night. At twilight, things took on enchanting images. Music was profound and literally made people cry. Around someone special, every glance or movement, let alone touch, created an intensity that eclipsed understanding. Stack that powerfully romantic evening up against a Wednesday afternoon health class where you studied carcasses. Remember pictures of mannequin-like images of men and women with celluloid overlays. One overlay would show their blue blood and red blood systems, another central nervous tissue, and then there was that worn-out, heavily fingered celluloid showing sexual organs. Learning plumbing is bad preparation for getting a sobering handle on passion.

We don't need lessons in anatomy as much as we need relationship education and consequent insight. In the class "Men and Women 101," adolescents need to learn that sex doesn't begin with anatomy—it starts with affection. It's proper and fitting that at least the same amount of time spent discussing the history of England, or parts of the eyeball, be spent talking with students about issues of life, love, and yes—lust.

Young people are being damaged because of powerful forces they don't quite understand. We are talking about a population that not all that long ago was jumping rope and playing with legos. One could expect some blundering in trying to work out the most complex relationship in the human sphere—passion and love.

It's not wrong, it might be awkward but it's not wrong, to try to connect adolescents with reality-oriented sexual behavior, including risks, values and honest affection as a serious part of their education.



Original version



2020 version