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A funny approach to birth control for young adults

By **Laura Sessions Stepp**, Special to CNN
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A dog keeps his eye on a couple in this campaign ad.

Editor's note: *Laura Sessions Stepp is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, formerly with The Washington Post, who specializes in the coverage of young people. She has written two books: "Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both," and "Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children through Early Adolescence." She is a senior media fellow for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.*

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Laura Stepp: Sermons against having sex ineffective, almost all young adults have sex
- U.S. has one of the highest unplanned pregnancy rates for single young women, she says
- Stepp: The smartest way to prevent unwanted pregnancies is to promote contraception
- Stepp: Ad Council campaign uses fresh approach of humor and website to help

(CNN) -- Nothing is funnier than sex. In all the fretting over teens having babies and ranting against abortion, we forget about the night the bed broke, or the trouble we had pushing the dog off the couch, or even the laugh we had at age 11 when we stole our big sister's list of words for vagina. ("The Duchess"? Really?)

For reasons religious and political, certain Americans have turned what is one of the most natural and silliest of experiences into a sermon. As in, don't do it until you're married. Young people, ages 18 to 29, are simply ignoring this. According to a [national survey](#) by the Guttmacher Institute, almost 90% of unmarried young adults have had sex, and most are sexually active.

This horse is not only out of the barn, it's down the road and having a long drink of water. And the cowboys and cowgirls trying to rope the horse back in would do better to turn their attention to an issue they might be able to do something about: promoting contraception.

Single U.S. women in their 20s have one of the highest unplanned pregnancy rates in the world: **seven out of 10, to be exact**. Five out of 10 such pregnancies result in births. Consequences for the young parents and their children can be severe: stalled educational opportunities and serious health and school problems, among others.



Laura Sessions Stepp

The latest major player to focus attention on pregnancy prevention is the Ad Council, the organization that, 67 years ago, brought us Smokey Bear and fire prevention and later, produced such notables as car crash dummies Vince and Larry and the phrase "Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

The Ad Council recently began offering 33,000 media outlets -- digital, TV, radio, outdoor and print -- the opportunity to run for free a series of short ads encouraging 20-somethings to use birth control. Humor is key.

Of course, unplanned pregnancy is a serious problem in this country, council President Peggy Conlon said in an interview, similar to others the council has tackled, such as such as childhood obesity, gay and lesbian bullying, and dating abuse.

"Frankly, we don't take on many new campaigns," Conlon said. "We get hundreds of requests and take on maybe three to five a year. We felt very strongly that educating young women about birth

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control is a straightforward proposition. The campaign is exclusively about what options you have if you decide you're going to have sex and don't want to get pregnant. It's really education in prevention, as simple as that."

The public service announcements aren't on a par with comedian Whitney Cummings' risqué material, but they do make any sex jokes we parents make look incredibly lame. In one of them, two partners struggle to remove jeans that are fashionably skinny. In another, the slippery shower stall poses a problem. In yet another, a passionate couple is interrupted by a voyeur: a black and white Great Dane-boxer mix with a disapproving stare. (No worries: I'm not spoiling anything here. The ads, created by the New York agency Euro RSCG, are way funnier than I am.)

At the end of each spot, viewers are directed to the website www.bedsider.org, which also uses humor to help visitors compare 15 kinds of contraception, locate the closest place to acquire various methods, set up regular birth control reminders, and watch videos of real women sharing birth control experiences, including women who are not having sex.

Animated shorts on the site debunk sex myths. As in, is it possible for a guy to be too big for a condom? One click on a drawing of a dachshund, entitled "2 big 2 fit," [brings up the answer](#). Want advice for better sex? The site has that, too, for example, "Warming the feet can increase your chance of orgasm by 30%." Who knew?

Bedsider is a project of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonprofit organization that bid last year for the coveted Ad Council support. The project is being funded -- to the tune of several million dollars -- by a private foundation that the campaign says has no connection to the pharmaceutical industry.

The [teen pregnancy rate](#) has declined nearly 40% over the past two decades, but rates of unplanned pregnancy among young adults have remained stubbornly high. This stagnation compelled Sarah Brown, the National Campaign's CEO, to seek fresh thinking, including help from IDEO, a San Francisco-based design firm whose clients include Converse shoes and the smartphone alternative Peek.

"We need to rebrand contraception as something that promotes self-determination, education and achievement," Brown said.

Not everyone will agree with Brown, of course. Recently, several conservative Republican lawmakers attempted to rebuke the concept of contraception as an endorsement of "consequence-free sex" that will bring about a "pagan society," and said it uses public funding to prevent a generation from being born. (I am not making this up. See NPR correspondent [Julie Rovner's broadcast](#).)

The problem is not contraception, dear U.S. Rep. Steve King and others; it's not taking advantage of contraception. Fewer than half of the young adults surveyed by Guttmacher said they used birth control carefully and consistently.

I confess I have some difficulty understanding why so many young couples today don't use birth control faithfully.

When women of my generation moved into adulthood, we had very few people to talk to about sex and only a couple of choices of birth control. Illegal and dangerous abortions were common. So it's easy for us to mutter something like, "Don't these young women know how lucky they are?"

Well no, many of them don't. Nor should we expect them to. What we can do is recall what it was like to do a little mattress dancing at their age, and how concerns about school or friends or the possibility of getting pregnant could keep us from really enjoying ourselves.

Few things in life feel as good as good sex, especially with a loving partner. And today, just as in the past, young people often have to brush away a bunch of pesky thought-gnats to enjoy it. The fear of pregnancy no longer need be one of those pests, and bravo to the Ad Council for reminding us all of that.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Laura Sessions Stepp.

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