

Too Much, Too Soon

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When it comes to America’s national conversation about young people and sex, the one principle that almost everyone purports to agree upon is the importance of “personal responsibility.” No doubt, personal responsibility is an indispensable element of healthy teen sexual decision-making (or any other behavior, for that matter). Paradoxically, however, effectively promoting personal responsibility requires a collective commitment to fostering a society that supports it.

To a large degree, sexual morés — positive or not — are shaped and transmitted through the culture. And there, too often, young people (girls, in particular) are being taught that being “hot” or “sexy” is the most important attribute that they can possess — more important than character, intelligence, or talent. Whether it’s the *Gossip Girls* books, Tila Tequila on television, or the recording artists who reference sex in the most degrading terms, young people are bombarded with the message that random and uncommitted sex isn’t just normal and acceptable — it’s almost expected.

When young people receive, accept, and act on that message, the results too often are tragic. It’s almost impossible to quantify the social, human, and economic price that young people, their children, and America as a whole pay when the cycle of young (and/or unwanted), unmarried parenthood continues. But it’s a steep one, as those across the political spectrum acknowledge.

Arguably, a teen’s responsibility to his or her fellow citizens can be discharged simply through educated and consistent use of birth control and protection, thereby eliminating the potential costs of funding social services for children on public aid, health services to treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the justice system to enforce parental obligations on the part of either or both parents. But a real understanding of the concept of “personal responsibility” also includes the responsibility that young people bear for themselves, as individuals, to make decisions that will allow them to flourish — physically, emotionally, and economically.

Research published in the *Journal of Adolescence* and by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has found that up to 80% of teen mothers are in financial circumstances so dire that they receive public aid. As of 2004, almost half of the nineteen million new cases of incurable STIs were erupting among adolescents ages 15 to 24. But even if teens could have sex without risking pregnancy or disease, many of them (especially girls) nevertheless suffer long-lasting emotional or psychological repercussions from sexual relationships. Experts have documented teens experiencing regret, anxiety, shame, disappointment, heartbreak, worry, damaged self-esteem, and impaired subsequent relationships as a result of giving too much, too soon.

That’s why young people need to hear that sexual self-restraint can be more than a negative choice. They should at least be exposed to the message that it can be a positive decision reflecting respect for themselves, their bodies, and their future spouses (and, for those who are people of faith, for the God who created them). Although such a message most certainly requires a vision of what it means to live a happy, fulfilled, and truly good life, sexual self-restraint isn’t

inextricably linked to religious doctrine, contrary to the claims of those hostile to the concept. Nor is sexual self-restraint, contrary to the way that abstinent young people are often portrayed in the news and entertainment media, freaky, deviant, or weird.

Even so, any effort to promote a broad understanding of “personal responsibility” will inevitably conflict with a culture that incessantly instructs the young, “If it feels good, do it.” And for that reason, generally society will have to offer young people something both deeper and more transcendent than dire warnings about lost earnings, fretful babies, and disease. It will have to equip young people with a meaningful understanding of what they’re waiting for; cultivate the attributes (like fortitude, modesty, and courage) that enable young people to live out a commitment to acting responsibly toward themselves and others; and foster social structures (whether at home, school, or church) that reinforce that determination.

His or her own parents, of course, are any young person’s first, best, and most important teachers. But in a society that claims to be dedicated to the well-being of every young person — and where the impact of poor sexual decision-making is widely felt — doesn’t it also make sense to aspire to a culture that supports a broad understanding of personal responsibility when it comes to sex? Or, at the very least, change our culture to one that doesn’t seem committed to actively working against personal responsibility?

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