

A Healthy Paradigm

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Responsibility is a two-way street. Young people have the responsibility to make good choices when it comes to protecting their sexual and reproductive health. Adults have the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to thrive in adolescence and to develop into sexually healthy adults.

We get into trouble when we focus on only one end of the responsibility equation in our society. Expecting young people to make healthy choices about sexuality when adult policy makers censor sex education and limit access to services is not a model for responsible behavior — it's an example of social hypocrisy.

By the same token, removing all expectations around young people's sexual health behavior is short-sighted and damaging. Young people have the responsibility to use the tools they are given to make good decisions — to avoid early sexual initiation, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infection. Responsibility also entails respect — taking the needs of others into account, particularly in relationships. And, once again, the value of respect in a social context is reciprocal. Society as a whole needs to take young people's relationships, ideas, and beliefs seriously.

Finally, responsibility entails rights. Young people have the right to education and information which enable them to take personal responsibility for important life decisions. Young people also

have the right to be safe and healthy within a relationship — free from physical or emotional coercion. They have the right to make decisions based on their own personal values and beliefs.

It is my belief that these three core values — rights, respect, and responsibility — are inextricably entwined and form the foundation of a healthy paradigm for adolescent sexual health and development.

James Wagoner, a respected public policy and reproductive health expert, has been the President and Executive Director of Advocates for Youth since September 1997. He spent seven years at NARAL, most recently as Executive Vice-President. During the decade prior to that, James served on the staff of Senator Howard M. Metzenbaum from Ohio. He is a graduate of Georgetown University.