Reclaiming 'Abstinence' in Comprehensive Sex Education

by

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My first real understanding of the distaste some sexologists have for the word "abstinence" came to light in 2006 as I proudly stood by my poster presentation at a conference given by the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT). The poster described a new, positive, and comprehensive model to replace the problematic abstinence-only-until-marriage programs of old. As colleagues walked by the four-panel poster that my intern, Laura Minnichelli, had created, many veered off their paths suddenly, as if the word "abstinence," would jump off the poster and bite them. Some looked briefly at the poster and gave a look of disgust, perhaps wondering how an "abstinence" poster infiltrated a sexology conference. Those who stopped to ask about it seemed puzzled initially. They saw the poster's worksheets on personal definitions of abstinence; on masturbation and outercourse; on the lack of efficacy of virginity pledge programs; and they gradually came to recognize that this was a call for a *different* type of abstinence education program. As these thoughtful individuals left, they offered words of thanks and encouragement that there was *finally* a sex ed program out there was reframing abstinence education.

There is no doubt that any self-respecting sex educator has good reason to be skeptical of a new abstinence paradigm. I can understand and even appreciate the sideways looks that some sexologists give after ten years of federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, and 25 years since the first "chastity education" federal funds were issued. Over $1 billion has produced curricula that are ineffective, directive, simplistic and insulting to teens – programs that want to tell teens *what to think,* not how to *think for themselves.*

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs virtually ignore the nearly 50% of teens who *are* having intercourse (Centers for Disease Control, 2006). They tell these teens to get with the program, but have no advice, otherwise, for teens that *don't* get with the program. At worst, they give misleading or inaccurate information about condom and contraceptive efficacy. These programs ignore lesbian and gay teens (and their families) who are told to abstain until marriage, but who don't have a legal right to marry, unless they are residents of Massachusetts. These programs produce virginity pledge programs, where 88% of teens who pledge virginity fail to keep that pledge, and are one-third less likely to use condoms at first intercourse (Brückner &

Bearman, 2005), elevating their risk for sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy.

There are many reasons to bemoan the current state of abstinence education. Just read Congressman Henry Waxman's report (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004), which tells us that 80% of federally-funded abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs contain false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health. Consider the wisdom of Dr. Michael Carrera, who reminds us that expecting outcomes when we tell kids to "Just say no" is no different than expecting success in the treatment of clinical depression by saying, "Have a nice day!" Or listen to teacher/columnist Deborah Roffman, who compares abstinence-only education to the sex-hungry media. Both, Roffman explains, tell teens exactly what to do. The media scream, "Always say yes," abstinence-only programs admonish, "Just say no," but *neither* encourage teens to *think* for themselves. That is, of course, the whole point of learning.

Two e-mails I received illustrate the contentious nature of the debate, and the negative reactions some people have to the word "abstinence." Both came from separate ends of the ideological universe, and the subject of this electronic wrath was the new theoretical and pedagogical concepts introduced in a sex education manual I co-authored with Sue Montfort, *Making Sense of Abstinence: Lessons for Comprehensive Sex Education* (Taverner & Montfort, 2005).

The first e-mail followed a very short editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* that commented on one of the themes of the manual – that it was necessary to discuss with youth the way they *define* abstinence, so as to better help them be successful with this decision. The e-mail began as follows:

> *Dear Mr. Taverner:*
>
> *Abstinence means NO SEX. Only a pointy head liberal could think there was some other definition, and it is pointy headed liberals that give liberalism a bad name. It takes the cake that you would…write some papers on trying to define abstinence. I have done that in four words above.*

More later on this writer's comments about defining abstinence – and on my seemingly pointy head, too! The more recent e-mail followed the announcement of the annual sex ed conference of The Center for Family Life Education (CFLE) that went to thousands of sex educators by e-mail. Themed on the manual, the announcement was titled "The Abstinence Experience: Teaching about Abstinence in the Context of Comprehensive Sex Education." The conference featured sex education leaders from prominent organizations – Answer (Formerly the Network for Family Life Education), the California Family Health Council, Montclair State University, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), and trainers from the CFLE. This e-mail read, simply:

> *Please REMOVE my email address from this mailing list. I am 100% against ABSTINENCE!*

This is not the first time someone has asked to be taken off the e-mail list, though usually such requests are polite. But beyond the rude tone of this request, the last sentence stopped me in my tracks:

> *I am 100% against ABSTINENCE!*

The capitalized ABSTINENCE was the writer's doing, not mine. Did I read this right? Or did he mean he was against abstinence *education?* Maybe he meant *abstinence-only-until-marriage-education?* But I *did* read it correctly; in fact, I cut and pasted the writer's remarks to this article! He was against *ABSTINENCE.* How could that be? If a person chooses to abstain

from sexual intercourse, or any other sexual behaviors, or drugs, alcohol, chocolate, or whatever, how could *anyone* be against that? And yet this is a common theme I have experienced since we began exploring the subject of abstinence more thoughtfully. It seems some comprehensive sex educators and advocates are *turned off* by the *word* "abstinence." The atmosphere among some might best be described as anti-abstinence. The anecdotal evidence:

- Upon reviewing the final manuscript for our new abstinence manual, one well-respected reviewer asked not to be identified in the acknowledgments. She explained that while she thought the manual was great, she also thought it would be a bad career move to become too closely associated with the "world of abstinence."

- One prominent sex education leader urged us to reconsider the title of both our manual and our conference. He did not think we should be promoting abstinence, instead favoring the term "delaying intercourse." (Imagine a title such as *Making Sense of Delaying Intercourse* – what could more clearly illustrate the disconnect between adults and teens who *never* think of themselves as "delaying intercourse," but who *do* sometimes choose abstinence?)

- An educator on my staff asked a colleague if he would be coming to our annual conference. The colleague said he had not yet received our flyer. The educator was surprised, since we had sent the flyers out over a month ago, and this individual had been on our mailing list for many years. Upon hearing the title of the conference, he replied, "That was *you?* I threw that out when I saw the word 'abstinence'!"

What was going on here? *Making Sense of Abstinence* had been nominated for four sex ed awards, to date, winning two. It had been showcased by SIECUS at a Congressional Briefing in Washington, D.C. And yet while most colleagues were embracing this new model for abstinence education, some were clearly shunning the idea of *any* abstinence education.

Certainly there are many reasons that justify the distaste of some of our colleagues for the current abstinence education paradigm among sex educators. The state of abstinence-only education is manipulative-to-insulting, from the moralizing, shame, and fear-based tactics to the sideshow industry that markets ineffective abstinence slogans on billboards, t-shirts, mugs, and even chewing gum. ("Abstinence gum – for *chewzing* an abstinent lifestyle.")

But all complaints about abstinence-only-until-marriage education aside, what is wrong with educating about the *choice* of abstinence? Doesn't the polling research say that American parents want their children to learn about abstinence? When comprehensive sex educators trumpet the latest polling data from groups like the Kaiser Family Foundation that says parents support comprehensive sex education, how do we miss the fact that the same polling data also reveals parental desire for their kids to learn about abstinence? What are we doing about this, and how can we react to the word "abstinence" so negatively when we are supposedly teaching it as a *part* of comprehensive sex education?

A NEW MODEL

The pedagogical concepts introduced in *Making Sense of Abstinence* make it unlike other abstinence education manual. There are four key themes that are woven throughout the manual's sixteen lessons:

(1) abstinence education needs to help young people *define* abstinence in ways that help them understand and apply their decisions in real life; (2) abstinence education needs to include decision-making, skills-building opportunities; (3) abstinence education is not just talking about which behaviors to *avoid,* but also the behaviors that are *permitted* in a person's decision; (4) abstinence education needs to help young people protect their sexual health, and transition safely when they decide to no longer abstain.

Defining Abstinence

Remember the guy who called me a "pointy headed liberal"? Define abstinence? Well, DUH! Abstinence means "no sex," right? Next time you are with a group of professionals, or a group of students, ask them to take out their cell phones and call three friends, colleagues, coworkers, children, parents, etc. and ask them to define the terms "sex" and "abstinence." You will be amazed, as I always am, with the discordant results you get. Do the definitions address only vaginal intercourse? Oral or anal intercourse? Other touching behaviors? Masturbation? What reasons or motivations emerge? Religious? Parental? Pregnancy prevention? Prevention of sexually transmitted infections? Assessing one's readiness? Marriage? Protecting one's mental or emotional health? When one person defines "sex," as "a loving, intimate, physical, connection between two people," does that mean that kissing or holding hands is sex? And, thus, abstinence is no kissing? When one says, simply, that "abstinence means no sex," does this mean one must also avoid the aforementioned feelings of intimacy and love?

If this seems like a trivial exercise, consider the following definitions of abstinence printed or posted by a variety of health-promoting organizations:

> *"Abstinence is…not having sex with a partner. This will keep the sperm from joining the egg."* (www.coolnurse.com)

> *"Abstinence is…no intercourse. Not even any semen on the vulva. Pretty straightforward."* (Kinsey Institute's Sexuality Information Service for Students)

Hmmm. So abstinence means no *vaginal* intercourse. But wait…

> *"For protection against infection…abstinence means avoiding vaginal, anal, and oral-genital intercourse, or participating in any other activity in which body fluids are exchanged."* (www.managingcontraception.com)

So, the motivation here is avoiding infections that may be transmitted via body fluid exchange. This could include oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse. It also seems to refer tacitly to another fluid through which HIV could be transmitted: breast milk. So, does one practice abstinence by not breastfeeding her child? From the Dictionary of Sexology (Francoeur, 1997):

> *"A definition of abstinence may include not engaging in masturbation."*

and

> *"The practices of tantric yoga recommend short periods of abstinence to concentrate one's sexual energy and prepare for more intense responses when sexual intercourse is resumed."*

Ah, so abstinence is periodic, for the purpose of making sex *better!* How about some input from abstinence-only programs:

> *"Abstinence is…voluntarily refraining from all sexual relationships before marriage in order to uplift your own self-worth and provide the freedom to build character, develop career potentials and practice true love."* (As cited by Kempner, 2001)

Abstinence for career potential? Never came up in my job interviews, but who knows today? Back to reality, Thoraya Obaid, executive director of the United Nations Populations Fund, reminds us that abstinence is not always a choice:

> *"Abstinence…is meaningless to women who are coerced into sex."*

As I collected all these definitions, I was surprised when glossaries on websites for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens repeatedly came up empty on definitions for abstinence. I asked my friend and colleague, Lis Maurer, about this. Lis is the director of Ithaca College's Center for LGBT Education and Outreach Services, and she explained:

> *"I remember a high school class where we were taught about abstinence. Afterward, several of us non-straight students got together and reacted. Some said, "OK – we're totally in the clear!" Others said, "No, we were ignored – they really don't know we exist!" and yet others were just completely confused, as if the lecture was in some other language."*

Finally, the website well-net.com sums up all this confusion quite nicely:

> *"Abstinence is…avoiding sex. Sex, of course, means different things to different people."*

Indeed. What might abstinence mean to a teen?

> *"I'm proud that my boyfriend and I have decided to be abstinent. We have oral sex, but definitely not real sex, you know?*

The importance of helping teens define abstinence cannot be underscored enough. A recent evaluation of one abstinence-only program found that teens developed more positive attitudes toward abstinence following the program. That seems like good news, but the study went on to explain that "abstinence" meant "abstaining from sexual intercourse," which meant, "the male's penis is in the female's vagina. Some slang names for sexual intercourse are 'having sex,' 'making love,' or 'going all the way.'" (Laflin, et al, 2005, p. 110). So while these teens were developing their positive feelings toward abstinence, they were learning nothing about how abstinence might *also* mean avoiding other sexual behaviors, including anal and oral intercourse that could transmit a sexually transmitted infection. The teen who said earlier that oral sex is not real sex could easily have been a participant in this abstinence-only education program.

The evidence is clear that teens need opportunities to discuss what abstinence means to them. They need worksheets, activities, and discussion opportunities to reflect on their reasons for choosing abstinence, and specifically what behaviors they will avoid while abstaining. If they ultimately decide *not* to avoid oral sex, anal sex, etc., then they need further information about protection from sexually transmitted infections. They need opportunities to learn to become effective with the *choice* of abstinence.

Decision-Making, Skills-Building Lessons

Maybe you've seen a billboard sign that says, "VIRGIN: Teach Your Kid It's Not a Dirty Word!" Or maybe you're familiar with the slogan, "Quit your urgin', be a virgin!" One of the abstinence slogans that always gets a chuckle is "Good cowgirls keep their calves together." The list goes on and on, and many of them are cute, catchy, and memorable. But none of them speaks to the complex decision-making skills that really need to be developed in young people to help them make decisions that are meaningful and responsible in their lives.

Young people need opportunities to develop concrete steps for "using" abstinence effectively. Abstinence is not just a state of

being; it is a method to be *used.* This is an important distinction. The former implies passivity; i.e., no need to think about anything when abstinence is the foregone conclusion. The latter encourages young people to think about *how* they are going to be effective with their decisions, to develop the skills to be successful with their decisions, and to re-evaluate their decisions as need be.

Abstinence skills include learning to plan for sexual abstinence, and practicing assertive communication, so that one can better stand up for one's decisions. It involves learning about sexual response, so that one can understand and manage their sexual feelings in ways that are consistent with their values and decisions. It involves enforcing boundaries with one's partner. It involves so much more than "Just say no!" or other simplistic, "educational" approaches that are far more directive than they are educational.

A relatively new model, supported by the federal government seeks to improve upon abstinence-only programs by teaching an "ABC" model. ABC stands for "Abstinence," "Be faithful," and "Use Condoms," and unfortunately it does not engage young people in thoughtful decision-making any more than its abstinence-only cousin. The United States exported its ABC's to Uganda for the purposes of HIV prevention. In Uganda, this hierarchical model stressed Abstinence first; with Be faithful reserved for those who couldn't seem to practice Abstinence; and Condoms reserved strictly for the sex workers.

This model has been championed by President George W. Bush, and new federal monies have been made available for ABC programming in the United States, despite questionable results (and different meanings of "A," "B," and "C") abroad (Cohen, 2003; Sindling, 2005). But a closer look at this simplistic approach exposes a model that is devoid of critical thinking and skills building. For example, what if a person is using "B" but their partner isn't? That person is likely to learn about three new letters, "S," "T," and "I," (sexually transmitted infections). Further, what if a person ditches "A," in favor of "B" without using C? Does anyone in these programs ever mention the possibility of an unplanned or unwanted "P" (for pregnancy)? Simplistic models like this continue to reveal the importance of helping young people think through their abstinence decisions and become effective abstinence users.

It's Not Just What You Avoid…

Why is it that we are not talking about masturbation when we are teaching about abstinence? Twelve years ago U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders was fired for suggesting this might be a good idea. Masturbation is one of the safest sexual behaviors around, perhaps the safest. There is no risk of getting pregnant, no risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection, no risk of getting *anything,* except pleasure. As Woody Allen said, "Don't knock masturbation. It's having sex with someone you love!"

So why does masturbation have such a stigma in America. I have a clue that maybe it has something to do with the things that have been written about it. Sylvester Graham, a New York preacher, wrote in 1834 that a masturbator grows up:

> *"with a body full of disease, and with a mind in ruins, the loathsome habit still tyrannizing over him, with the inexorable imperiousness of a fiend of darkness."* (Graham, 1834)

And, in 1892, a prominent nutritionist, John Harvey Kellogg, wrote this:

> *"As a sin against nature, [masturbation] has no parallel except in sodomy. The habit is by no means confined to boys; girls also indulge in it, though it is to be hoped, to a less fearful extent than boys, at least in this country. Of all the vices to which human beings are addicted, no other so rapidly undermines the constitution, and so certainly makes a complete wreck of an individual as this, especially when the habit is begun at an early age. It wastes the most precious part of the blood, uses up the vital forces, and finally leaves the poor victim a most utterly ruined and loathsome object.*
>
> *Suspicious signs are: bashfulness, unnatural boldness, round shoulders and a stooping position, lack of development of the breasts in females, eating chalk, acne, and the use of tobacco."* (Kellogg, 1892)

No wonder the anxiety! It didn't matter that none of these statements were true. People still flocked to buy the recommended antidotes, Sylvester's Graham crackers and Kellogg's Corn Flakes, both of which were supposed to suppress the urge to masturbate (and neither of which contained sugar or cinnamon in those days!)

More than a century later, as Americans continue to eat Graham crackers and Corn Flakes, we still retain myths and misinformation about masturbation. Perhaps if we can make young people feel a little less anxious about a behavior in which so many already engage, we can help them recognize masturbation as an important, safe *alternative* to intercourse.

Abstinence education needs to discuss other safer sexual behaviors, including outercourse, that get young people thinking about non-genital activities that are safe, and will keep them free of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. These behaviors – masturbation and outercourse – have inexplicably been omitted from abstinence-only curricula. It is as if we really think that if we don't mention these topics, teens won't think of it either! Have we really become that disconnected with our nation's youth? We really need to examine *why* information about masturbation and outercourse is omitted in abstinence education. Is it to keep information about sexual pleasure from young people? What gives anyone the right to withhold *any* information from young people, especially information that might help keep them safe, while feeling positively about themselves? One of the most frustrating aspects of being a teacher must be school policies – written or unspoken – that prevent teachers from being able to engage their students in an open, honest dialogue about sexual *pleasure* while they are also teaching about sexual *safety.* But the two go together when it comes to masturbation and outercourse.

Susie Wilson, who used to run the Network for Family Life Education (now called Answer), gave a review of *Making Sense of Abstinence,* and she put it better than I could have:

> "[Students] will learn that there is a long continuum of behaviors between "saying no" and "doing it" that will keep them safe, not sorry. Educators will feel more secure about teaching tough topics such as oral sex, masturbation and outercourse, when they see they are allied with discussion about personal values, decision-making and communication."

Help Young People Protect Themselves If/When Their Decisions Change

A final, critical part of abstinence education is the need to help young people protect themselves if and when their abstinence decisions change. It is no longer enough for us to bury our heads in the sand and just hope that teens remain abstinent through high school, college, and into young adulthood (or up until age 29, as the new federal abstinence-only guidelines suggest). We need to equip them with the skills to make that transition safely.

One way is to help them identify signs of "*sexual readiness.*" Students might read stories about other teens who are making sexual decisions, and assess and discuss how ready (or not) these teens are against any number of sexual readiness checklists. Consider these two teen quotes:

> "At times I get all hot with my partner and I feel like I really want to have sex. At other times, I know that I shouldn't have sex until I am ready. The problem is that sometimes I feel like I am ready and other times I feel like I am not ready. What should I do?"

and

> "I've been going out with this guy – he's 18. Everything was romantic at first, but now he's gotten real pushy. Last time we were alone, he gave me a beer. I didn't feel like drinking, but he kept pushing it on me, so I drank it just to shut him up. Now he's pushing the sex thing on me. It's like we don't talk about anything but sex. I know he's tired of waiting for me, but I think things are getting out of hand, and I'm not sure I'm ready."

Both teens deserve much more than a catchy slogan. They need tools and discussion to help them identify how one knows when one is ready, and how to identify coercion in a relationship, and how to leave coercive relationships. We need to help young people actively think of their decisions in their sexual lives. Sexual intercourse is not something that people are just supposed to stumble into, without thinking of their decisions and their potential consequences. By contrast, the current culture of abstinence-only education supports teens making virginity pledges, which simply do not work. 88% of teens who make such a pledge break it! (Brückner & Bearman, 2005). And those teens are less likely to use protection, because they've never learned about condoms or contraceptives, or they've been taught only about failure rates.

In training teachers, I often say, "Sex education *today* is not necessarily for *tonight.*" This is very applicable when it comes to abstinence education. We need to think about sex education in the context of a lifetime of sexual decision-making, and abstinence as a conscious decision that is one's right to assert at anytime in their life. At the same time, we need to help teens gain knowledge and develop skills to protect their sexual health (i.e., learn about condoms and contraception) if and when they decide to no longer abstain, whether it is tonight, or in college, or when they celebrate a commitment ceremony, or after they walk down the aisle.

Young people need more from sex education. They need education that includes the *choice* to abstain. They need accurate information, not evasive, undefined terms, or misleading, or false information. Young people need and deserve respect, not to be subjected to scare tactics. They need to develop skills to be successful with abstinence; not to hear catchy slogans. They need to be met where they are, and recognized for their ability to make responsible decisions about their sexual lives. They need abstinence education, but they deserve better than what they've been getting so far.

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