

## Abstinence-Only Education: How It Harms Teens

*"And that's why birds do it, bees do it*

*Even educated fleas do it*

*Let's do it, let's fall in love "*

*-Cole Porter*

Sexuality is a normal part of a human life, an integral part of human identity, and a valuable way to achieve intimacy with loved ones. In order to have a thriving, wholesome and well-adjusted sexuality, it is vital to learn information about its impact on our physical and mental health from a young age. Abstinence-education, or Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) education is unethical, ineffective, and discriminatory. Offering a dangerously distorted image of sexuality, AOUM policies are steeped in conservative Christian values that have no place in shaping education policy.

It is certainly a very basic, simple truth that abstinence is the only completely foolproof way to not get pregnant, and to remain free of most sexually-transmitted diseases, provided you were born with a clean bill of health. One does not have to look much further than our fundamental urge to protect the young to understand the good intentions that can inspire such an educational policy. Parents, teachers, and guardians want to ensure that young people grow up to be healthy, safe, and strong, and to avoid making the same mistakes that they themselves might have made. These desires are not unethical, they are benevolent and universal. However, in practice, teens are unable to remain abstinent—by choice or by coercion—even with abstinence-only education, and additionally, the consequences of abstinence-only education are far more insidious than the noble desires that may underly such policies (Talbot).

With sex, as with any other practice, part of life, or activity, people are likely to make the

most responsible decisions when they have access to the most information and best resources on the topic. Withholding essential information is not only ineffective, it is unethical and an abuse of power. Messages and images about sexuality saturate mainstream culture. Young people receive confusing and contradictory messages about sex. A 2007 study by the APA definitively ruled that young women are harmed cognitively, emotionally, mentally, physically, and developmentally by sexualization in the media. (Zurbriggen) It is the responsibility of parents and educators to provide information, guidance, and mentorship to children during every stage of their development, to help them navigate the world of sexuality and relationships. To actively deny information about an essential part of human life is an abjuration of duty, and ensures that children will either learn by doing or seek information on their own from a myriad of dubious sources. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that AOUM education does not actually reduce pregnancy, delay the sexual "début" of teens, or prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease (Talbot). This consistent lack of efficacy is maybe the least controversial reason that AOUM is unethical. A practice that does not produce the desirable consequences of its goal—or desirable consequences at all—is unethical and in dire need of revision. An ethical approach to education demands that policy be rooted in science and reason, not the arbitrary morals of one specific group. Abstinence is a value that is overwhelmingly held only by white evangelical Christians, with about half of Protestants and a negligible percentage of Jews—just about a quarter, subscribing to the value at all. Sex education, or any type of education for that matter, should not be based on the values of one religion, or any religion at all. Furthermore, utilitarian ethics require us to look at both the consequences of a policy and to judge its validity by examining its use in bringing about human happiness. With evaluations of publicly funded abstinence-only programs in several U.S. states showing no desirable changes in sexual behavior (in terms of preventing teen pregnancy or the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and infections), it is clear that AOUM programs are to the extreme detriment of human happiness.

Policies of AOUM education fetishize virginity, an unattainable luxury for teens who may have already been exposed to sex through coercion, violence or abuse, and a

designation that is irrelevant and insulting for teens with queer identities and sexualities. By assigning a certain value to the loss of innocence—sometimes directly through imagery that portrays the hymen as a diamond—AOUM makes virginity a commodity, which is unethical and damaging. Portraying virginity and sex as a fungible commodity that girls should try not to depreciate is dehumanizing and unethical. Feminist litigator and writer Thomas Maculay Millar notes that the abstinence movement is "summarized by the familiar old saying that men will not buy the cow when they can get the milk for free." Abstinence-only education that emphasizes virginity does not teach that girls deserve respect and to be valued for being themselves, apart from their ability to provide sex. "We may appreciate the milk, but this does not extend to appreciation of the cow." (Millar 31) In her 2008 essay "Purely Rape: The Myth of Sexual Purity and How It Reinforces Rape Culture," Jessica Valenti points out that a preoccupation with virginity sexualizes purity by making it coveted. This puts those at an age of perceived innocence (namely, children) at a higher risk. It also "enables sexual violence" by reinforcing the already troublingly pervasive false virgin/whore dichotomy, in which those who do not possess the purity asset are devalued or punished (Millar 30). In a society where irrelevant factors like what a woman is wearing or her past sexual history can become factors in acquitting her assailants in a rape case, it is dangerous and unethical to promote a sex education policy that fetishizes virginity in the way that AOUM education does (Valenti 302). If virginity is a commodity, then sex is a transaction, and one with an inherent power inequity—because abstinence-only education portrays sex as something that men take from women, instead of something that consenting individuals can do with each other (Perry 206).

A 2004 congressional report found that publically-funded AOUM programs "treat stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific fact," which distorts the truth and confuses the development of young people's sexuality and gender identity at an already vulnerable age (Advocates for Youth). Furthermore, the language and culture of abstinence-only programs and the corresponding culture of purity balls and hymen-as-diamond imagery promotes predator behavior and sexual entitlement in young men, while simultaneously marginalizing female sexual agency by portraying

women as purveyors of the commodity sex, and only for the sole purpose of providing pleasure for husband instead of in their own right as sexual creatures. These purity balls and chastity pledges are as ineffective as they are damaging, with 88% of pledgers having sex before marriage and becoming increasingly less likely to use contraception after breaking the pledge (Advocates for Youth).

AOUM education by definition does not include much information about sex—and in fact school policy might prohibit teachers from even answering questions about sex acts (Lipschutz). However, it does allow for a very basic understanding of the penetrative heterosexual act that can result in conception. Because procreation requires ejaculation, young boys get a loose description of how they might learn to masturbate. Since conception does not require a female orgasm, female sexuality becomes marginalized and invisible. Because of that, AOUM is discriminatory. Young girls are not the only group damaged by AOUM policy. An exclusive emphasis on procreative sex is also outrageously heterocentric and delegitimizes the totality of queer experience (Kulwickski 306). The marginalization of sexualities and identities that do not strictly conform to a monogamous heterosexual model contributes to a "sex-negative culture" and propagates shame (Riggs 110). This is, of course, because AOUM education is completely bereft of the concept of sex for pleasure. Denying sex for pleasure is heterosexist and dishonest, as well as irresponsible, since many pleasurable sex acts involve a lower risk for pregnancy and infection, provided they are safe and consensual. As Margaret Talbot points out in her essay "Red Sex, Blue Sex," the absence of that concept deprives young people of their right to be "bodily," and gives them no recourse at all for addressing sexual desire. It is also the most blatant evidence that AOUM is based on conservative Christian values, rather than science, reason, or results, as an ethical and effective public education policy should be.

While some deficiencies in AOUM are more glaringly obvious—such as information about the various methods of protection and masturbation—others are more subtle, and may even be absent from sex education programs that acknowledge and prepare for the existence of premarital sex. A curriculum designed to omit all information about sex

by emphasizing abstinence harms young people by failing to provide any guidance about vital aspects of intimacy such as obtaining enthusiastic consent and other important aspects of communication. While such a deficiency is bad for everyone, it specifically does a disservice to already disempowered population: girls. Many teens are forced into the world of sex without their consent—by social pressures, sure, but also more directly, via abuse and assault, with one in four girls and one in six boys being sexually abused before the age of 18 (Advocates for Youth). While it is difficult to say if abuse is more common in communities using abstinence only education—especially since abuse, domestic violence, and rape are notoriously underreported—the need for a more comprehensive sex education is clear, with one in five teens reporting abusive relationships and with abused girls specifically reporting having sex earlier and without contraception (Advocates for Youth). AOUM education not only omits information about consent, but actively shames and blames "survivors of sexual violence through an obsessive contention that just saying no is the solution for everything" with no stipulations for "what happens when no is ignored." (Perry 203) As Cara Kulwicki points out in her 2008 essay "Real Sex Education," educators and guardians have a "responsibility, particularly to young women, to give them the tools they need to recognize abuse."

By examining these statistics, it is not difficult to construct an idea about what a healthy alternative to abstinence-only education could be: a program that portrays sexuality as a normal, integral part of life and offers scientific information to young people about how they can remain healthy and happy. Proponents of this alternative call it comprehensive sex education, and it has proved successful in reducing teen pregnancy and STD contraction in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and parts of the U.S. Comprehensive sex education involves a holistic effort by parents, doctors, educators, and the government to destigmatize open dialog about sex using an emphasis on safety, pleasure, and even humor. In such a program, "the morality of sexual behavior is weighed through an individual ethic that includes the values of responsibility, respect, tolerance, and equity." (Perry 204) Tellingly, students in comprehensive sex education programs do not have an earlier sexual début—to the contrary, the approach that

promotes a "deeper connection" with students' "emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical" domains delays unprotected sex for 60% of students and any sex at all for 40% (Advocates for Youth). Indeed, Margaret Talbot suggests that one reason AOUM fails is that in its single-mindedness, it fails to provide the "emotional discipline and psychological smarts" necessary to remain celibate.

In order for young people to preserve their health and happiness and to protect themselves from harmful influence and abuse, they need comprehensive sex education. Abstinence-only education is itself an abuse of power, and is unethical and damaging both by way of actively reinforcing unhealthy gender roles and denying essential information and guidance. It is an educational program based on religion as opposed to reason, and it has no place in a functional civilized society. We will not progress until it is eradicated.

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