Adolescent Attitudes and Beliefs About Sexual Behavior

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ABSTRACT: Four hundred and fifty-one teenagers responded to a sexual attitude survey. Results focus on attitudes and values related to sexual activity and to parental and school involvement and responsibility for sex education. Findings are reported as they relate to six important sexual decisions: to have intercourse or not? to have children or not? to use contraceptives or not? to have an abortion or not? to give the baby up for adoption or not? and to marry or not? Lack of communication, feelings that parents were unaware of their teenagers' sexual behavior, and uncertainty and confusion about their sexual feelings also surfaced.

While attitudes and values are not necessarily reflected in their behaviors, it is important that we understand how young people feel about their sexuality, how they perceive the behavior of their peers and what kinds of sexual decisions they think they will make when placed in sex-related situations. It is interesting also to know how much support, information, and understanding young people feel they get from parents and teachers. This study attempts to answer some of these questions.

The Current Situation

According to a national report (Time, 1984), students surveyed seemed to reflect the general cultural swingback to more traditional expectations with a stronger commitment to family, marriage, and the idea that sex is tied to affection or justified by it. Similarly, a July 1983 reader survey by

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Psychology Today reported considerably more conservative attitudes particularly among the young, than a similar poll taken in 1969. Half of those under age 22 felt that sex without love is unenjoyable or unacceptable.

Reports of adolescent sexual behavior highlight the increase in intercourse and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. According to Miller, in 1983, 12 million of the nation's 29 million young people between 13 and 19 years of age will have had intercourse; 8 in 10 males and 7 in 10 females. Although the number of births to teenagers has declined, this decline has been restricted to married teenagers. The birth rate for unmarried adolescents has increased and almost all of these unwed mothers will keep their babies.

A comparison of teen-age pregnancy rates in 27 developed countries revealed that compared to teenagers from Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Great Britain, and Canada, those in the United States have higher birth rates at every age (15 through 19) by a considerable margin. The maximum relative difference occurs at ages under 15. American girls also have the highest abortion rate—by age 18, 60 of every 1000 have had an abortion, twice the rate of the next highest nations (Sweden and France 30 per 1000). The rate of sexual activity is similar in all five countries, and median age of first intercourse varies only slightly -19 in Canada, 17 in Sweden and 18 in the other three countries. There are however, two major differences between the United States and other nations which could account for the high rate of teen-age pregnancy in this country; reluctance to use birth control methods and perceived difficulty in obtaining contraceptives without parental knowledge. Another major difference between the United States and other countries is the promotion of sex education in the school and the attitudes of the government toward preventing pregnancy (Cancila, 1985).

Teenagers have many motivations for wanting to be sexually active including psychosocial needs for acceptance and love, peer pressure, and simple curiosity and experimentation (O'Reilly and Aral, 1985). The need to achieve maturity and acceptance through parenthood has been identified as one motivation for sexual activity among low-income black girls (McAnarney, 1983). Some researchers feel that most adolescent sexual encounters are initiated by the male in an attempt to affirm his heterosexuality (Mosher and O'Grady, 1979). However, Kornfield (1985) reports that the adolescent mothers in her study feel that "it was as much my doing as his" (p. 26). Sex play was initiated, one thing led to another, and it just happened.

Teenagers are concerned about issues related to pregnancy and child care, especially female students in senior high schools who report the strongest need for sex education (Mensah et al., 1983). Adolescent social