

The joy of sex education

America's virgin soldiers are on their way – ignoring the dangers of abstinence for teenagers

The flame of sexual liberation may soon have to be kept alive by us geriatric delinquents. A US evangelical group has announced that next month it will be recruiting British teenagers to its campaign against sex before marriage. In the States, more than a million have taken the pledge. "Great Britain," the organiser insists, "is fascinated with the idea of sexual abstinence." In my day such a fellow would have been horsewhipped. Yet young people are flocking to him. Is there no end to the depravity of today's youth?

Not if the US government can help it. The abstinence campaign that hopes to corrupt the morals of our once proud nation – a group called the Silver Ring Thing – has so far received \$700,000 from George Bush, as part of his campaign to replace sex education with Victorian values. This year he doubled the federal budget for virginity training, to \$270m. In terms of participation, his programme is working. In every other respect it's a catastrophe.

No one could dispute that thousands of teenagers in Britain and the United States are suffering as a result of sex before marriage. Teenage pregnancies are overwhelmingly concentrated at the bottom of the social scale: the teenage daughters of unskilled manual labourers are 10 times as likely to become pregnant as middle-class girls. According to the United Nations agency Unicef, women born into poverty are twice as likely to stay that way if they have their children too soon. They are more likely to be unemployed, to suffer from depression and to become dependent on alcohol or drugs.

The prevalence of both teenage pregnancy and venereal disease in this country and the US is generally blamed on lax morals and a permissive welfare state. Teenagers are in trouble today, the conservatives who dominate this debate insist, because of the sexual liberation of the 60s and 70s and the willingness of the state to support single mothers. On Sunday, Ann Widdecombe maintained that sex education has “failed”: those who promote it should now “shut up” and leave the welfare of our teenagers to the virginity campaigners. Denny Pattyn, the founder of the Silver Ring Thing, calls this “the cesspool generation – suffering the catastrophic effects of the sexual revolution”. These people have some explaining to do.

Were we to accept the conservatives’ version, we would expect the nations in which sex education and access to contraception are most widespread to be those that suffer most from teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. The truth is the other way around.

The two western countries at the top of the disaster league, the United States and the United Kingdom, are those in which conservative campaigns are among the strongest and sex education and access to contraception are among the weakest. The US, the UN Population Fund’s figures show, is the only rich nation stuck in the middle of the third world block, with 53 births per 1,000 teenagers – a record worse than those of India, the Philippines and Rwanda. The UK comes next with 20. The nations the conservatives would place at the top of the list are clumped at the bottom. Germany and Norway produce 11 babies per 1,000 teenagers, Finland eight, Sweden and Denmark seven and the Netherlands five.

Unicef’s explanation is pretty unequivocal. Sweden, for example, radically changed its sex education policies in 1975. “Recommendations of abstinence and sex only within marriage were dropped, contraceptive education was made explicit, and a nationwide network of youth clinics was established specifically to provide confidential contraceptive advice and free contraceptives ... Over the next two decades, Sweden saw its teenage birth rate fall by 80 per cent.” Sexually transmitted diseases, in contrast to the rising rates in the UK and the US, declined by 40% in the 1990s.

“Studies of the Dutch experience,” Unicef continues, “have concluded that the underlying reason for success has been the combination of a relatively inclusive society with more open attitudes towards sex and sex education, including contraception.” Requests for contraceptives there “are not associated with shame or embarrassment”, and “the media is willing to carry explicit messages” about them that are “designed for young people”. This teeming cesspool has among the lowest abortion and teenage birth rates on earth.

America and the UK, by contrast, are “less inclusive societies” where “contraceptive

advice and services may be formally available, but in a ‘closed’ atmosphere of embarrassment and secrecy”. The UK has a higher teenage pregnancy rate not because there is more sex or abortion, but because of “lower rates of contraceptive use”.

The catastrophe afflicting so many teenagers in Britain and America, in other words, has been caused not by liberal teachers, liberated parents and Marie Stopes International, but by those who campaign against early sex education, discourage access to contraceptives and agitate against the social inclusion (income equality, the welfare state) that offers young women better prospects than getting knocked up. Abstinence campaigns such as the Silver Ring Thing do delay sexual activity, but when their victims are sucked into the cesspool (nearly all eventually are), they are, according to a study at Columbia University, around one-third less likely to use contraceptives, as they are not “prepared for an experience that they have promised to forgo”. The result, a paper published in the British Medical Journal shows, is that abstinence programmes are “associated with an increase in the number of pregnancies among partners of young male participants”. You read that right: abstinence training increases the rate of teenage pregnancy.

If all this were widely known, the conservatives and evangelicals would never dare to make the claims they do. So they must ensure that we don’t find out. In January, the Sunday Telegraph claimed that Europeans “look on in envy” at the US record on teenage pregnancies. It supported this extraordinary statement by deliberately fudging the figures: running the teenage birth rate per 1,000 in the US against the total teenage birthrate in the UK, so leaving its readers with no means of comparison.

Breathtaking as this deception is, it’s not half as bad as what Bush has been up to. When his cherished abstinence programmes failed to reduce the rate of teenage births, he instructed the US Centres for Disease Control to stop gathering data. He also forced them to drop their project identifying the sex education programmes that work, after they found that none of the successful ones were “abstinence only”. Bush should also hope that we don’t look too closely at his record as governor of Texas. He spent \$10m on abstinence campaigns there, with the result that Texas has the fourth-highest rate of HIV infection in the union, and the slowest decline of any state in the birth rate among 15- to 17-year-olds.

So when this bunch of johnny-come-lately foreigners arrives next month with their newfangled talk of “virginity” and “abstinence”, I urge you chaps to lock up your daughters and send them on their way. It’s up to the older generation to keep our young whippersnappers off the straight and narrow. #