

Abstinence Or Obstnacy?

*By Richard Cohen
The Washington Post
May 17, 2002*

Before I tell you what Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.) did, I want to tell you something about her. She is the daughter of a Lutheran minister. She has a degree in religion, and her late husband graduated from divinity school. She was head nurse at Yale-New Haven Hospital and director of the Santa Barbara school system's teenage pregnancy and parenting program. Last month, she offered an amendment to the government's sexual abstinence program, asking only that it be medically and scientifically accurate. She lost, 31 to 19. Soon after, the measure providing more money for President Bush's cherished abstinence-only program sailed out of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, heading to the floor, where it passed yesterday. No surprise there. The provision to keep America's teenagers as ignorant as possible about sex—even, as Capp knows, to teach them what is false—is embedded in a whale of a bill that contains so much for so many that, should it have failed, it could only mean that our cherished political system has collapsed and reason has triumphed.

The abstinence-only provision is a measure so illogical that just to contemplate it raises the sound fear that you will lose your mind. It offers the states \$50 million a year to teach abstinence as the only way to deal with sex. That's it. Nothing about sex education. Nothing about how to avoid pregnancy, venereal disease or HIV-AIDS. Condoms may be mentioned, but only in the context of their failure rates. The fact that they most often are effective must not be mentioned. In effect, teachers must lie.

Now consider the American teenager. More than half of those aged 15 to 19 have had sex. For 18-year-olds, the figure is 70 percent. More than 750,000 teenagers a year become pregnant. Compared with teenagers in, say, sexually rambunctious Sweden or France, those in America are a sorry lot. They have the highest rate of adolescent childbearing (22 percent for the United States; 4 percent for Sweden) and the highest abortion rate. The figures speak for themselves: When it comes to sex, our kids don't know what they are doing.

The same can be said for our political leaders. It's not, mind you, that there is anything wrong with abstinence, which is, as our tautology-addicted president tells us, 100 percent effective. Rather it's that abstinence only works when it works. When it doesn't—when the well-intentioned kid falls off the wagon—he or she ought to know what to do. The consequences can be lethal—HIV-AIDS, for instance.

The abstinence-only program did not, as you may think, spring from the brow of George W. Bush. It has been around since 1996, when some legislators with dirty minds slipped it into the welfare reform bill. But both in concept and as legislation it has been embraced by Bush, who mentions it frequently and with enthusiasm. "It works every time," he said recently. So does death.

continued

In a sense, abstinence-only is the intellectual heart of Bushism. It is based solely on faith, on conviction—on what ought to be and not on what is. The program persists despite no evidence that it works and in the face of some evidence that it does not. It is a muddled aspiration, coupled with such sanctimonious nonsense about chastity until marriage that it simply cannot be taken seriously.

But even if abstinence was the way to go, what could be wrong with teaching sex education as well—just in case? Where else, in what other area, do we insist on ignorance and maintaining that knowledge is wrong? This is not our way. This is a totalitarian concept. It amounts, truly, to abuse of power.

The power and authority of the teacher rest on his or her greater knowledge. What do you call it, then, when information that could be necessary for a full and happy life is withheld? What do you call it when, through avoidable ignorance and its handmaiden, shame, a teenager gets pregnant, has an abortion or has a child? What can you call it when, for lack of knowledge, a child gets AIDS and dies? Is this what George Bush wants? I hope not. But this is what he's going to get.

The United States is far and away the most religiously observant of all Western nations. Yet it has teenage pregnancy rates that also lead the Western world. Our kids are not immoral or irreligious. They are too often woefully ignorant—ashamed of their sexuality, hiding it and its consequences from everyone, not even knowing that a condom can save their lives. Lois Capps—mother and nurse—asked, in essence, only for the government to tell kids the truth.

It abstained.

(Copyright, The Washington Post 2002 All rights reserved)