

# RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-choice

## The Role of Religious Congregations in Fostering Adolescent Sexual Health

HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), a high rate of suicide among gay and lesbian teens, and date rape are disturbing realities. As people of faith, we cannot allow schools, pop culture, the media, and peers to be the major sources of information about sexuality nor can we rely on silence, rules, and pat answers. We must reclaim responsibility for educating our youth about sexuality. We must prepare them to make wise decisions.

### The Challenge

Faith traditions affirm that bearing children and forming families are among the most significant and satisfying tasks of adult life. The challenge of guiding youth into sexually healthy adulthood is complex. Sexuality involves much more than body parts; it includes identity, roles, relationships, perceptions, and expectations. It also includes attitudes, opinions, experiences, self-concepts, and feelings. Much has changed since the days when the most adverse consequence of sexual intimacy was unwanted pregnancy; with the spread of HIV, we must make sure young people understand their health and even their lives are at risk.

Religious congregations can accept the challenge to foster adolescent sexual health in four ways.

### 1. Create an Open, Supportive Environment

In communities of faith and in families, we must be willing to face the difficult and potentially embarrassing issues about sex. Some adults hope that if they avoid discussing sex, the issues will just go away. Youth interpret that silence to mean, "I am bad" or "Sex is shameful." Parents worry that talking about sex with their children is tantamount to giving them permission

to have sex, when it really just gives them permission to talk about sex. Sharing values and religious beliefs includes discussions of intimacy, love, marriage, relationships, sexual intercourse and other physical expressions of love and affection, sexual orientation, self-esteem, the role of emotions in sexual expression, body image, and gender expressions and expectations. The process should include learning to listen to other perspectives with compassion and respect.

A congregation can create an atmosphere of openness and support in small but significant ways. Real human situations—celebrations, sorrows, moral dilemmas—related to sexuality—can be illustrated from the pulpit, named in congregational prayer, studied in meetings, and discussed in youth groups. Silence on issues of sexuality sends a message of judgment and shame; open sharing in a faith community communicates compassion and acceptance of each individual as a child of God.

### 2. Teach and Practice Critical Thinking Skills

Young people need the skills to arrive at their own answers more than the answers themselves. Adults can encourage youths' questions, gently challenge their views, and initiate discussions of "What would you do if?" Practicing critical thinking strengthens "moral muscles" in maturing youth.

Opportunities for clarifying and sharing values and beliefs are crucial. People of faith need to establish their own beliefs about the meaning of sexual expression and then look for opportunities to share these beliefs with young people. If we don't communicate what we believe about love—about the nature, role, and purpose of humanity and how we understand God to be acting in our lives and in the world—who will do it? Young people need to hear faithful views and the reasons for them, to help them develop their own thoughtful, caring views that will shape their lives.

They also need significant relationships with adults in addition to their parents. They often will listen to adults who are not their parents.

### **3. Provide Youth With Tools And Resources**

Youth need complete sexuality education. Ideally, schools would teach the biology and anatomy of reproductive health and faith communities would provide the meaning and moral foundations. But increasingly loud voices at local and national levels demand that schools abridge sexuality education because they believe information is dangerous to young minds. As people of faith, we need to speak up in community forums and school board meetings in support of comprehensive, adequate sexuality information for our young people. Ignorance, not information, is the danger.

Facts alone are not enough. Young people need to be able to articulate their values. They need to know what their faith tradition says about sexuality and why and how their decisions might be informed by their faith. Your congregation might sponsor sexuality education seminars for parents and young people; parent education workshops or support groups, and youth sessions or classes.

Clergy are highly supportive of discussing sexuality issues in their congregations. According to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice's 1996 survey of clergy attitudes toward human sexuality and reproductive choice, the large majority of clergy respondents from all traditions supported comprehensive sexuality education in congregations, using faith-based curricula.

The survey also showed that many congregations and clergy do not know that faith-based educational materials are available. To help provide information about the denominational resources available to congregations, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has developed a booklet, *Apply Our Hearts to Wisdom: A Guide to Faith-Based Sexuality Education*. Please contact [info@rcrc.org](mailto:info@rcrc.org) for a copy or contact individual denominations about their resources.

### **4. Help Youth Face Prejudices**

Youth need to be accepted as they are and affirmed as individuals, then be challenged to accept and affirm others. Religious communities and families can help youth identify prejudice and rise above judgmental thinking. Youth can be cruel to others they perceive as different—shorter, smarter, more or less talented, possibly gay or lesbian, more or less attractive, more or less sexually developed. With guidance, youth can see that our faiths call us to manifest attitudes of acceptance, not judgment.

### **Make A Difference**

Religious congregations can assume a large role in fostering adolescent sexual health and, by doing so, have a positive impact on individuals, families and communities. The ideas and principles suggested here can provide the basis for change in your family, congregation, and community.

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*The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.*

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