

Part III

Challenges Facing Youth

Section 6

Ethical Sexuality

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SEXUALITY, WHEN DIRECTED BY LOVE AND RESPONSIBILITY, has the capacity to enhance inner growth and the pursuit of meaningful life goals. Misdirected, its harm to the heart, conscience, relationships and career can be uniquely painful and hard to reverse. Given these inevitable moral implications, education about sexuality is rightly addressed from the perspective of character and values. Indeed, character education can hardly avoid the topic, particularly when addressing teenagers for whom sex is frequently an all-absorbing focus.

There is a promise of synergy between character education and sex education that can promote good character and support responsible sexual behavior at the same time. Yet for this to happen, it is necessary to go beyond traditional norms to find agreement on an ethic of responsible and healthy sexual love. Such an ethic recognizes the moral implications of sexuality and the deeper need for enduring love. Educating for such an ethic furthers character development: not pressuring others for sex demonstrates respect; waiting until the appropriate relationship requires self-discipline; resisting negative peer pressure demands courage. Though adults hold reservations about advocating abstinence to the young, an updated expression of this ethic addresses these concerns.

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An Ethic of Responsible Sexual Love

SEXUALITY REPRESENTS A UNIQUE CHALLENGE TO CHARACTER and culture. Arguably the most formidable power that human beings have at their disposal, sexuality is inextricably intermingled with the impulse to love, the creation of life, and the passing down of genes and lineage.¹ Indeed, because it taps into the deepest aspects of being human, sex is something that borders on the sacred. As such, sexuality inescapably involves issues of right and wrong, responsibility and irresponsibility. For these reasons, organizations such as the Character Education Partnership have proposed the integration of sexual ethics into character education.

The Four Spheres of Love paradigm implies a sexual ethic. (See Section 4) It proposes that sexual intimacy is a feature of the spouse's sphere alone. It suggests that respecting this guideline facilitates an individual's character development and social maturation, while violating this standard hinders it. This implied ethic is worthy of further elaboration.

Love: The Deeper Need

Decades after the sexual revolution, people are reconsidering the prevailing sexual norm. The sexual revolution promised men and

women more love, happiness and freedom. It did not deliver on these promises. Since the breakdown of the monogamous norm, society has been plagued with staggering epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. More insidious have been the emotional agonies of broken relationships, disillusionment and divorce.

Under intense pressure to perform sexually and to be sexually attractive at all costs, people these days are arguably less comfortable and contented in their relationships with the opposite sex and with their own sexuality than ever before. Ironically, sexual dysfunction in the form of lack of desire was the most widely reported sexual malady in the highly eroticized culture of the United States in the last decade. Author Peter Marin concludes, "We have been liberated from the taboos of the past only to find ourselves imprisoned in a 'freedom' that brings us no closer to our real nature or needs." Why did the bright ideals of the sexual revolution fail so abysmally?

A central reason is that the revolution emphasized sex and the body rather than love and the heart. Psychologist Rollo May differentiated between the impulse for love and the drive for sex, saying, "For human beings, the more powerful need is not sex per se but for relationships, intimacy, acceptance and affirmation."² Frank Pittman explains that most extramarital affairs take place more over the telephone than in the bedroom.³ Adultery's main allure is the hope of satisfying the loneliness of the heart, not the sexual impulses of the body.

Ironically, when sex is overvalued, eroticism itself is the casualty. "Somehow I missed the boat on the pleasure cruise to carefree, guilt-free sex," a young college student writes in a popular woman's magazine, after sampling the campus sex scene. Liaisons that are "void of emotion" and hence dull, she noticed, are "the all too common basis of an active sex life." Now, "with all the fuss about sexual freedom, it's a little hard to stand up and admit it's not what everyone imagines." Indeed, sex without the love and loyalty that give it meaning is empty and ungratifying. Some people respond to this emptiness by trying a variety of positions, of partners and practices, but this leads to even more jadedness and lack of feeling.

If the deeper human need is a heart-to-heart connection, sexual union can only be a supplement, not a substitute. However, since love and sex are so interconnected, people often mistake a sexual attraction for "the real thing." Their yearning for intimacy propels them into sexual relationships in hopes of finding true love. Yet sex can obscure the

meaning of love. Often these relationships wind up hurting them and hurting others, damaging their ability to love and be loved in a deep and authentic way.

Philosopher Elisabeth Haich captures the confusion of sex and love in insecure relationships well: "Sexuality mimics love. It compels tenderness and embraces; it forces the lovers to hug one another, to allay one another's pain through the revelations of sexuality, as when true love is exchanged. What follows such experiences? Disappointments, a bitter after-taste, mutual accusations or bleak loneliness, feelings of exploitation and defilement. Neither of the two gave true love but only expected to receive it, therefore neither received it!"⁴

A sexual norm that respects the needs of the heart and conscience as well as the body—that harmonizes unselfish love and passionate sexuality—represents a more complete, enlightened and responsible ethic of sexual love. Such an ethic is sorely needed in contemporary times, when the old taboos are gone but few new standards for behavior have been set up as guideposts.

Ethic of Intimacy

Sexual ethics, of course, have been evolving since the celebration of blatant promiscuity in the 1970s. Now there is the more restrained practice of serial monogamy—having a series of exclusive sexual relationships that last for some time. The *Playboy* ethic has given way to an "ethic of intimacy."⁵ "I want to feel very emotionally attached to someone before I have sex with her," says Oliver, a sophomore at New York University. Love is now the main reason why both young men and women enter into a physical relationship.⁶

Sexual activity is still regarded as morally neutral; motivation decides its morality. A certain definition of affection now legitimates sex, according to popular ethicists. As long as there is intimacy, care, emotional vulnerability and at least some degree of commitment, the sexual relationship is considered justified. The only immoral sex is that which is deemed "loveless" or "meaningless."⁷ This is typified by the advice that Kelly, a young dental hygienist from Connecticut, gives her three younger sisters. "I say, 'Don't avoid sex. Just make sure that each sexual encounter matters.'"⁸

Certainly this represents a retreat from the trenches of the sexual revolution and an awakening of an incipient new sexual ethic. It remains, however, too vague to be of any real help. If mutual consent, tolerance and a loose definition of love and intimacy prevail, this legitimates temporary liaisons based on fickle feelings. Perhaps this precludes the most overt exploitation, but the more subtle kinds of hurting—including where the victim is a willing if foolish participant—are given free rein. Ultimately the innate desire for true and lasting love is left unsatisfied as well. A clearer standard is necessary.

Philosophical Roots of the Sexual Revolution

If any written reference can be identified as the foundation of the prevailing sexual ethic, perhaps it is the "*Playboy* philosophy." Championed by Hugh Hefner beginning in 1954 and trumpeted through his *Playboy* magazine and related enterprises, the *Playboy* philosophy has shaped the sexual attitudes of several generations. Hefner ridiculed marriage and parenthood as restrictive of personal freedom and asserted that any kind of sex is a private matter between consenting partners. He popularized the notions that recreational sex and masturbation with pornography are healthy activities for adult men. Prior to Hefner, most college-educated men felt that such activities were juvenile or immoral.⁹ In this way, the *Playboy* philosophy rationalized the worldview of adolescent boys. It legitimated the impulse to seduce and discard women and to prefer bachelor pleasures to the pursuit of responsible and unselfish partnerships with women.¹⁰

Hefner sought to disseminate the notions of Alfred Kinsey, the most influential sex authority in the world.¹¹ His 1948 *Kinsey Report* purported to be the first objective research into human sexuality. Its morally "neutral" tone influenced people to begin to think of sex divorced from ethical implications. Kinsey asserted that human beings need frequent sexual "outlets" or they will suffer from psychological problems.

The context of sexual release was irrelevant—marital relations, premarital sex, infidelity and even incest and exploitation of children were all equivalent. Further, he declared that illicit sex was far more common than people had suspected. Many decent people began to question their moral reservations about sex outside of marriage, since they believed they were missing out on pleasures others were enjoying. In addition, Kinsey claimed evidence of the sexual nature of young children and thus opened the doors to legitimating child sexual abuse.

Recent discoveries now confirm that Kinsey misrepresented American sexual behavior, relying on biased methods and unrepresentative samples.¹² For example, one in four of the people he interviewed for this report were prisoners or ex-convicts, hardly examples of normal human behavior. Five percent of these were male prostitutes. More sinister, he presented data on the sexual activity of children based solely upon the reports of one pedophile's abuse of over 300 victims. Despite a "neutral researcher" persona, there is substantial evidence that Kinsey had a clear agenda to legitimate homosexuality, pedophilia and promiscuous sexual behavior, activities in which he and his colleagues participated.¹³

Through Hefner, Kinsey's sexual ideology penetrated deep into the male psyche. By 1972, *Playboy* reached half of all male professionals. As recently as 1985, *Playboy* was found to be America's "most widely read sex education resource."¹⁴ Its views helped turn sexual mores—and legal codes—upside down. Given its roots in pseudo-science and its fruits of dubious freedom, the ethic of "sexual liberation" is due for replacement by one based on valid research, universal values and a higher vision of love.

The Moral Component of Sexual Love

Loving sexual expression is other-centered, an act of sharing. Someone motivated by true love does not put his or her beloved in jeopardy in any way. Healthy sexuality therefore inevitably involves morality—the way people treat and affect others.

Sexual encounters are not a casual matter, a purely physical activity that simply ends when it is over, like enjoying good food. Sex encompasses the partners in their totality, touching their minds and hearts as well as their bodies. It is the very “language and embodiment of commitment” between two people who have pledged to spend their lives together.¹⁵

Sexual relations also have implications for many other lives—friends, parents, other potential life partners, and, of course, any resultant children. Consider this all-too-typical scenario: Max and Leanna, both 20, met and soon after began a sexual relationship. When Leanna became pregnant they thought to abort, but assurances of support from their parents and relatives as well as their own affection for each other led them to decide to have the baby. Six months into her pregnancy, though, when they realized that they were unprepared to commit themselves to each other and to the child, they put the baby up for adoption. An infertile middle-aged couple began adoption procedures and brought the infant home when he was born. Soon, however, Leanna’s parents asserted that they wanted to raise the child themselves. Relations among Max, Leanna and their families became stressed to the breaking point. The adopting couple surrendered the baby and went through an agonizing series of rising hopes and shattered dreams as the parties argued the issue out. The child spent the first few weeks of his life shunted between an angry mother, irate grandparents, and the adoptive couple who were afraid to give their hearts to him.

This illustrates how the impact of sexual relations often has little to do with the partners’ intentions. They may have cared for each other and meant each other no harm. They may have had no wish to conceive a child. They may have wanted to spare their family and community any disruption. It also does not matter whether or not the partners had the capacity to cope with the consequences. They may have been only young and foolish.

Like fire, sexuality is a powerful force. It can either enhance or impair people’s lives, based solely on whether or not it is released in the circumstances that can fully contain and direct it constructively.

Healthy and Ethical Sexuality

"It was a tough situation," said Rick, a professor in his 30s, of his moral dilemma. "I was working late every night for weeks on a special proposal for my department. My wife Yolanda was fighting a bad case of flu and so when I got home she was wiped out. We hadn't made love in over a month. I was feeling pretty lonely, I guess. Then one of my grad students started coming to my office in the evening with her dissertation questions. She admired me a lot and she was pretty, in her late-20s and single, it turned out. On one occasion too many she leaned very close to me and I could smell her perfume. Her eyes said she was willing...."

Rick is grappling with the central question in a discussion of a sexual ethic: What is healthy, ethical sexuality? Researcher and psychologist Archibald Hart describes ethical and healthy sexuality as sexual response "at the appropriate time and towards the right person when the right conditions are fulfilled."¹⁶ It is helpful to elaborate on the components of this definition.

"At the appropriate time and towards the right person" represents self-control in the workplace, at social functions and within the family. A healthy, mature person is able to focus his or her sexual arousal on the chosen partner and limit arousal towards others. He or she can also wait until a proper time not only in terms of other responsibilities but also relative to the partner's needs and preferences.

A further elaboration is "when the right conditions are fulfilled." Right conditions involve many elements. There is the matter of the partner's preferences for the context of lovemaking. But clearly more important are the moral and relational components—primarily unselfish love and lasting commitment. Significant too are such social factors as adequate economic resources and the support of parents and relatives. Only meeting these conditions will contain all the potential consequences of sexual union for the partners, their families and society. At the same time they create the safety and security necessary for the greatest sexual satisfaction for both partners.

What then is unhealthy, unethical sexuality? Turning the previous definition on its head yields some insight. It can mean a response at an inappropriate time—when too young and unmarried, when other responsibilities beckon or when the spouse does not want it. It can mean a focus on an inappropriate person—someone else's spouse, an

unmarried peer, a child. This implies that encouraging arousal—or at least not discouraging it—by fantasizing or flirting is also not ethical.

To sum up, unhealthy, unethical sexuality is physical union under the wrong conditions: wrong time, wrong person, wrong motives. These represent insufficient concern for and commitment to the welfare of all who would be involved and hence is immoral. Rick finishes his story: "I caught a glimpse of the picture of Yolanda and my son on my desk and got my bearings. I made up some excuse to go home and from then on I met that grad student in the library."

Sex and Marriage

For spouses, sex fulfills several important roles:¹⁷

Sex strengthens the bond between husband and wife. Sex fosters the growth of a special kind of friendship and intimacy in marriage. It reinforces the uniqueness of the conjugal relationship. Physical union symbolizes and reinforces the union of the partners' lives in all the other aspects—emotionally, financially, as parents and in destiny.

Sex is a special way to express love. Sex conveys love in a unique way, though it cannot replace other signs of affection. It remains a shared and exclusive experience between the spouses even if there is little else in common. At times of emotional distance during the shifting seasons of marriage, sex can be a reassuring point of connection until emotional intimacy can be reestablished.

Sex reinforces the exclusivity of the relationship. When daily life pulls the attention and energy towards children and other people in the home and community, sexual relations can reaffirm the central place the spouse occupies in a couple's lives.

Sex provides a sense of emotional security that promotes happiness. Physical affection calms and reassures in a way that complements verbal expressions of caring and acts of thoughtfulness.

Sex helps to overcome conflicts and to mend rifts. The non-verbal physical communion of sex is a relief from heated arguments and petty divisive issues and helps to remind the couple of their

essential commitment and companionship. Especially in the beginning of marriage when many conflicts arise, the excitement of exploring sex together serves as a grounding experience that carries the couple through difficulties.

Sex reduces stress and anxiety by releasing tension. The feeling of togetherness and physical release provide a welcome relief from the stresses of daily life.

Simply, sex is a powerful bonding force that affirms and celebrates the special intimacy between husband and wife. Through sex, spouses express their affection for each other and comfort each other amidst the strains of daily life.

Role of Sex in Uncommitted Relationships

Uncommitted partners, after their first sexual encounter, sense a line has been crossed. Their relationship has irrevocably changed. Traditionally the partners were said to have “lost their innocence”; they can be said to have exited the sibling’s sphere. However, without the mental and emotional backbone of lifelong commitment to one another, they are unprepared to handle the myriad relational obligations—spoken and unspoken, accepted and denied—thrust upon them. Participating in the conjugal sphere on an inappropriate foundation, they are caught up in issues that damage the heart and hinder growth.

Sex outside of marriage holds great allure, of course. It can seem to function as in marriage: expressing affection, bonding the partners, adding sparkle to their relationship and helping it to feel special. Unfortunately, it can also bring about practically the exact opposite of what sex does in marriage. It can highlight the underlying sense of emotional insecurity, introduce and aggravate conflicts, and increase stress and anxiety—effects so subtle as to be initially overlooked.

Sexual involvement without the lifetime commitment that marriage represents is only a symbolic experience of the partner in his or her totality. It frustrates the desire for authentic oneness. It can bond people who do not belong together, creating a false intimacy that deceives them into investing time and energy that would be better spent elsewhere. It can eclipse other means of relationship building and communication, eroding the basis for sustaining the relationship long-term. It can aggra-

vate the tendency of immature couples to turn inward and neglect other people and responsibilities as well as other growth-promoting relationships and activities. Thus, uncommitted sex carries a host of hazards for the relationship as well as the individuals involved. (See Chapter 24)

A New Sexual Counterrevolution

"The time is ripe for a sexual counter-revolution and a renewal in love that leads to marriage," says Amy Kass, author and professor of a course on romantic love at the University of Chicago.¹⁸ Indeed there are many signs of a shift in the currents of young love. Eric Nielson, a student at Rutgers, is unashamed to announce he is a virgin and he figures half his friends are too.¹⁹ He is among the ever greater numbers of adolescents and young adults who are resisting the pressure to engage in unmarried sexual activity.

High school virgins are in the majority for the first time in twenty-five years in the U.S.²⁰ Significantly, the increase was more than twelve times greater among boys than girls.²¹ This represents a swing in male youth culture towards self-restraint. Attitudes have changed as well. A 1997 UCLA survey finds the majority of college freshmen disapprove of casual sex, an increase of 10 percent in the last decade.²² Almost half of teenagers believe sex before marriage is "always wrong"²³ and 60 percent advocate teaching abstinence to unmarried adolescents.²⁴

Virginity is becoming a source of pride. The media calls "teenage celibates" the "fastest growing youth movement."²⁵ More than 2.3 million youth—13 percent—have pledged to save their virginity until marriage.²⁶ Music celebrities join them in that pledge²⁷ and the professional organization called Athletes for Abstinence includes basketball and football stars within its ranks.²⁸ Television shows showcase committed virgins. Over 20 contestants for various state beauty contests in 1999 used abstinence education as their platform

and several won.²⁹ Books and periodicals signal this shift³⁰ and note an emerging trend toward earlier marriage, without cohabiting or many prior sex partners.³¹

There are hints of a global trend. Marriage is burgeoning in France, where the average age of first intercourse has risen to 18 in general and age 20 for the middle class.³² From Japan to South Africa, a pro-abstinence movement is gaining ground.³³

The trend is not unambiguous, of course. U.S. sexual activity and cohabitation rates for the young remain higher than before the sexual revolution. But youth now have a vantage point unavailable to prior generations—they can see the hazards as well as the pleasures of sexual expression. “They’re far less willing to take the risks,” says Kirsty Doig, of a New York market research group. “They’ve seen... the huge consequences: death, divorce.”³⁴ Researcher Rosalind Miles writes that these offspring of the sexually permissive generation “currently display in their conversation, in their behavior, in their music and culture, a fierce faith in monogamous, exclusive, lifelong love and mutually faithful partnership.”³⁵ Market researchers call it “neo-traditionalism” and note youth mores may well resemble their grandparents’ more than their parents’—“Picture Eisenhower but with a pierced eyebrow.”³⁶

Celebrating Abstinence Outside of Marriage

Premarital abstinence liberates young people from unnecessary burdens and ensures the freedoms that all young people want to enjoy. Tara Roberts, a 24-year-old virginal woman explains, “I [want] to be in control of and empowered by my sexuality.”³⁷ She points out that “virginity” is “derived from a Latin root meaning strength, force, skill.” Says Dawn, 19, of Tucson, Arizona, virginity is “a matter of self-respect, and also the respect of my real friends.”³⁸

An abstinent lifestyle encourages teenagers to make friendships with many kinds of people, including the opposite sex. It gives them

the space to learn creativity in expressing affection without physical intimacy. This fosters good social skills, a boon to later marriage and parenthood. At the same time it facilitates finding a marriage partner by protecting promising relationships from the misunderstanding, selfishness and distraction that sex can introduce.

Concerning future marriage, abstinence contributes to a person's financial stability before and after marriage since it frees energy to work on their careers and prepare in other ways for what will be expected of them as spouses, as parents, and as productive citizens. "As a father of four," says author Daniel Gray, "I am reaping the dividends [of investments made] years earlier when I heard and put into practice the message of abstinence before marriage."³⁹ These dividends include moral authority in guiding his children. More directly, premarital abstinence builds a foundation of trustworthiness and the habit of fidelity.

Those who no longer have their virginity can reap some of the advantages of abstinence by simply deciding to change. "I wanted to [become celibate] because sex had become such a... controlling factor in my life," confides a male university student. "I felt I could rise to higher levels... mentally, if I wasn't so focused on it."⁴⁰

After two years of sexual intimacy with her fiancé, Ray, Susan sensed that sex dominated their relationship. She called off the sex as well as the engagement. Ray came to realize they needed to change. The couple later began their relationship again, this time grounded in a commitment to friendship and premarital abstinence. "Now I am happily married to Ray," Susan says. "Waiting until marriage to have sex [has] been worth it."⁴¹

Sexual Love Entails Responsibilities

When asked why he was still a virgin, 26-year-old Neal Bernards replied, "To me, intercourse implies a commitment that translates into a willingness to spend a lifetime with my partner and/or the children we create."⁴² These words suggest the inherent responsibilities of sexual love that an enlightened ethic would affirm. They are basically three: to the conscience, to the present or future spouse and to the present or possible future child.

1. Responsibility to the Conscience

Honoring the conscience means living out moral convictions and respecting universal values regarding the larger meaning of sexuality. It encompasses responsibility to the individual's parents and grandparents—some might call this family honor—and to the larger community. "I've come this close at times to going too far," admits Ramon, a 23-year-old electrician, putting his thumb and index finger almost together. "But my fiancée and I have held the line at kissing and things like that. Partly it would be against what I believe in, and partly I'd be too ashamed to face my parents. My Dad's first and only woman was my mother. It was the same with his dad and mom. Dad once told me he almost cheated on Mom once, but one reason he didn't was because he did not want to set that kind of example for me. Times are very different for me than they were for Dad, but I still feel I want to uphold my family's values."

Furthermore, being responsible to the conscience involves the determination to achieve maturity of heart and character, to become a person of sufficient integrity to be able to fulfill the other two responsibilities of sexual love.

2. Responsibility to a Spouse

This recognizes the obligations of an enduring partnership. For single people, this means to be mindful of their future husband or wife and practice fidelity to them in advance. "I've had an empty frame near my bed since I was 13," says Tashika, a junior in an East coast high school. "I imagine it's my future husband and I sometimes write letters to him when I get lonely. It helps when my friends tell stories of having sex and stuff with their boyfriends and I start to get jealous and left out. Then I think about how I want to be when I face my future husband and I realize I want to save the excitement for him." For married couples, it is a commitment to cherish and care for their spouse and to preserve trust—the foundation for love—by being faithful to each other.

3. Responsibility to Children

Entering into sexual union implies the commitment to the potential result—a new person. The parents have a responsibility to the child they have chosen to create, to lovingly nurture him or her to his or her

maturity. A loving marriage is the most secure foundation for the care of children. Children naturally want and need their parents to love each other and to be together, not only for their physical and emotional nurturing but also as an affirmation of their identity and value. Moreover, marriage is a worthy anchor for the lineage being created. It passes on a sound legacy and a healthy tradition for the descendants to inherit, imitate and build upon. "My parents have their shortcomings," says Jane, a mother in her mid-40s, "but you've got to hand it to them: 50 years of marriage, that's something to brag about." All children deserve to be proud of the love that conceived and raised them.

Only an ethic of committed, lifelong, mutually faithful monogamy—fidelity in marriage and abstinence before marriage—fulfills these three inherent responsibilities of sexual love. Such an ethic allows the nurturing and cohesive power of love to bind individuals, families, and ultimately a society together in strength.

Awakened to the downside of the permissive sexual ethic, society grapples with fashioning an ethic of healthy and responsible sexual love. A viable ethic recognizes the moral implications of sex and the deeper need for enduring love. It understands that sex in marriage not only heightens the sense of bonding, exclusivity and security between the partners, but it also addresses all the responsibilities inherent in physical intimacy. It celebrates the freedoms that premarital abstinence affords young people: to reach personal maturity and prepare for family life and their roles as citizens. It affirms these realities, not out of tradition, but out of a critical evaluation of the emotional, moral and social dimensions of this powerful and far-reaching act.

A high school senior, when sharing about her sexual experiences, concluded she'd like to be married the next time. "I'd want something permanent before having sex again, some stability, a reason he won't leave or I won't leave."⁴³ A progressive and yet responsible expression of the ethic of monogamy helps young people avoid the many pitfalls of sex outside of marriage (the subject of the next chapter) and find the surest route to romantic satisfaction, happy family life and personal maturity.

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Consequences of Sex Outside of Marriage

I cannot here enumerate... the young men and women whom I once saw as a therapist and teacher, who, barely out of adolescence, had slept with so many people that they found themselves frigid or unresponsive beside those whom they genuinely loved.

—Peter Marin¹

LETHAL SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES AND UNWED parenthood garner attention from parents, teachers, legislatures and public health officials. Lost in this focus is the reality that even if disease and pregnancy are avoided, every sexual encounter outside of a mature and lifelong commitment—marriage—carries the risk of negative psychological, relational and social consequences. This risk is inherent to the nature of sexuality and therefore unavoidable.

Because the prevailing permissive ethic is grounded in a certain non-judgmental tolerance, the deeper, non-physical levels of harm and therefore the more subtle forms of abuse within sexual relations receive little acknowledgement. Patricia Dalton, a clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C., speaks of her clients displaying “an almost breathtaking lack of awareness of the price they stand to pay for casual sex.”²

To admit that people are hurting and being hurt in these relationships would mean that some activities have to be deemed wrong. Instead, those suffering have often been left to doubt themselves, to blame their anguish on their residual inhibitions left over from the “dark ages” of traditional values.

These more subtle consequences of nonmarital sexual expression fall into categories roughly reflecting the three basic life goals. There are effects upon the individual, upon the pursuit of loving relationships and family, and upon the wider culture. Therefore, the issue is relevant not only to sexuality education but also to character and marriage education as well.

Impact on the Individual

As first explored by educators Thomas Lickona and Josh McDowell,³ the emotional and psychological harm of sex in insecure relationships may be perceived only semi-consciously at the time, eclipsed by the pleasures and supposed benefits of expanded experience. Too often the real price paid is discovered after much of the damage is done. One woman psychiatrist recounts the impact of her promiscuous teenage years: “That sick, used feeling of having given a precious part of myself... to so many and for nothing, still aches. I never imagined I’d pay so dearly and for so long.”⁴ The effects of sex outside of marriage on psychological health, especially among adolescents are many:

Hindered Personal Development

Getting involved in sexual activities prematurely and in insecure relationships drains youth of the energy needed for emotional, moral, creative and intellectual growth. Sex under these circumstances becomes a powerful distraction away from important tasks that adolescents need to complete on the way to personal maturity, creating a family and pursuing their careers.

Julia, a college sophomore at a Midwestern university, reflects upon her first two years away from home: “When I get involved with a guy that way, it seems like everything else stops. I don’t see my friends or make new ones or join in any extra activities—everything gets absorbed in him. The funny thing is that the times between boyfriends are the times when I really start to grow as a person. That’s when I take the

time and go to the trouble to get together with girl friends, do volunteer work, go to plays, take long walks." Since she noticed this, Julia has opted for a celibate lifestyle that frees up time and energy to pursue creative growth.

Derailed Character Growth

In marriage, sexual intimacy supports the partners' mutual love, while in uncommitted relationships among youth, it is mainly to boost the partners' egos.⁵ Premarital sex thus often compounds self-centeredness, rather than supporting the developmental task of learning unselfish love.

Worse than hindering character growth, nonmarital sex is a corrupting influence. It's no secret that people will lie and cheat to get sex. In one group of 75 middle-class 19-year-old male students, most admitted that they had used force or other means to get sex, according to a University of Connecticut study. Sixty-five percent of the young men had gotten young women drunk for that purpose. More than half had arranged to enter their date's apartment and 40 percent had used verbal intimidation. One in five had used force or threats of violence.⁶

About half of University of California students surveyed admitted to lying in order to get sex. A quarter of those men who were sexually involved with more than one person at a time said their sexual partners did not know.⁷ In a separate California study of male students tested for AIDS, many confessed they would conceal even a lethal disease—25 percent would not tell sex partners if they were found to be HIV positive.⁸

Middle school students are inheriting callous moral attitudes when it comes to sexual matters. In a national survey of students in grades six through nine, over 65 percent of boys and girls said it was acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if they have been dating for six months or more." One third said it was all right to rape a woman if she was not a virgin.⁹ When people treat others as objects to be exploited, they actually end up debasing themselves.

Regret, Guilt and Shame

College counselor Carson Daly comments, "I don't think I ever met a student who was sorry he or she had postponed sexual activity, but I certainly met many who deeply regretted their sexual involvement."¹⁰ Several surveys suggest that half of sexually experienced students report

“tremendous guilt” as part of the aftermath.¹¹ People intuitively feel that to give away their virginity in an unworthy relationship, and to possibly continue to abuse their sexuality, is a profound violation of self. This becomes a source of shame. The shame is deeper still if they have violated their parents’ trust and feel compelled to keep their sexual activity a secret.

Physical Impact: Teenage Unwed Pregnancy

Adolescent girls becoming pregnant and bearing children has always been commonplace; until the recent past they were typically married. Though the younger the girl the greater the health risks to both her and the baby, the greatest hazards of pregnancy to an unwed teenager are less physical than psychological, relational and economic—mainly due to her being unmarried.

Pregnancy can generate a great deal of emotional distress, not the least of which is tension between the teenagers and their parents and between the partners themselves. Nine out of ten American adolescent boys abandon their pregnant girlfriend, even if reluctantly. Suicide is seven times more likely for the pregnant girl.¹² Economically, girls who choose to bear their child are far less likely to complete higher education, to marry and to escape poverty. Indeed, mothers who are unmarried, under 20 years old, and without a high school diploma are ten times more likely to raise their child in poverty in America than those who are not.¹³

If the girl aborts the pregnancy there are risks as well. Physical complications—scarring, infection, or damage to organs—are not uncommon. Emotionally there is a hazard of chronic grief and guilt. Over 80 percent of teenagers in one study reported preoccupation with the aborted fetus, and half had nightmares.¹⁴ Boys who are involved can be troubled by the event as well.¹⁵ There have even been cases of babies surviving the abortion and being born, to haunt the young parents with their abortion-related disabilities.

A ruined reputation only aggravates the shame. One girl explains: "I get asked out all the time and I'm sick of the creeps who just want to make out all the time. I am also sick of myself. I'm only 17, and my reputation is not worth a dime.... Whenever I meet a new guy I wonder how much he has heard."¹⁶

Worst of all, if someone has knowingly—or even unknowingly—used another only for the pleasure of sex and then witnessed the partner's heartbreak after being discarded, this can generate guilt that can linger over a lifetime. A young man recalls his first sexual involvement as an adolescent: "I finally got the girl into bed... but then she started saying she loved me.... [When] I finally dumped her... I felt pretty low."¹⁷ Jacques, a Canadian in his 20s, recounted how he had had his first sexual encounter with a woman after an evening of drinking together. "What I can't forget is how she said she'd never been so happy in her life." This evidence that the sexual relationship had meant so much more to her than it did to him haunted him, and his guilt followed him for years.

Lowered Self-Respect and Self-Esteem

A reliable casualty of nonmarital sex and multiple partners is the sense of self-respect and self-esteem. Jennifer Grossman, 30, candidly shares one reason: "The acceptance, even encouragement of premarital sex makes it very difficult to sustain the fantasy that we are loved alone."¹⁸ When sex is a matter of making conquests or negotiating favors, or using and being used, youth cannot help but lose respect for themselves, even if they are not conscious of the loss for a long time. William, a good-looking college student who had had numerous sexual encounters, was disturbed after watching a 1950s movie and the modest way people dressed back then. "They had so much dignity. I've lost that, and I don't know how to get it back."

Further, making sexiness and sexual prowess an important basis for romantic connections amplifies the tendency to judge people on what they do and how they look rather than on who they are.¹⁹ Thus anxiety is built into insecure relationships. "Do I still please you? Do I still look good?" There is always the legitimate fear that someone else will perform better or look more attractive when sexual utility is the criteria for attention.

Sexual Addiction

Mae Williams, a senior at Howard University, commented, "I don't have time for casual sex, it's too addictive. I've seen people fall into a pattern of nonrelationships. Those are worries I don't want."²⁰ Adolescents are always facing the temptation to seek an easy escape from the challenges of growing up and taking responsibility for their lives. Like controlled substances, sex is addictive—there are estimated to be over 13 million sex addicts in the U.S.²¹ As with any addiction, sex can take over relationships and overwhelm other interests.

Depression and Destructive Behavior

All infatuations or romantic involvements of some duration are painful when they break up. When sex is introduced, the emotional ties as well as expectations are intensified. Sex is like powerful glue that, once bonded, has no way to release its grip. Hearts that have bonded through sex, even in a casual encounter, are unlikely to disengage without being torn in some way. Psychologists have pointed out that breaking off such relationships can precipitate an emotional crisis that resembles that of a divorce. This is exemplified in the words of one girl, who said, "I didn't know how to live without him. I wanted to curl up and die when we broke up."

This heartbreak, compounded with the sense of having given themselves so totally for such a paucity of return, not to mention the fallout of a pregnancy, abortion or an STD, can help drive young men and women to the brink of despair. One tragic result is teenage suicide, which has tripled over the past 25 years in the U.S.—the same period during which the rate of teenage sexual activity rose so sharply. Statistically, non-virginal girls are six times more prone to suicide than are virgins.²²

Adolescent premarital sex is also associated with other destructive behaviors. Sexually experienced girls aged 12 to 16 are 18 times more likely to run away from home than virgins. They are 9 times more likely to be arrested by the police. The probability of being suspended from school is 5 times greater. Non-virginal girls are 10 times more likely to use marijuana, one of the gateway drugs. Similar correlations are found among non-virginal boys.²³

Physical Impact: Sexually-Transmitted Diseases

While public attention is often drawn to the danger of AIDS, it is small in numbers compared to the massive epidemic of other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). There are 300 new STD cases for every new AIDS case in the United States.²⁴ Of the total population infected with any STD, two-thirds of these cases are youth under the age of 25.²⁵ It is estimated that half of nonvirginal Americans can expect to be infected during their lifetime. More than one in five teenagers and adults currently has an incurable viral STD, apart from AIDS.²⁶

People remain largely unaware of the risks and consequences of STDs. Condoms are largely ineffective with common infections like genital herpes, gonorrhea, human papilloma virus and chlamydia.²⁷ Viral diseases have no cure. Many people are even unaware that they have an STD. Like AIDS, these diseases can show no symptoms for quite a while.

The potential consequences of STDs include chronic pain AND psychological distress. In one study over half of herpes victims reported fear of rejection and depression during their most recent outbreak.²⁸ More serious consequences include infertility, a greater susceptibility to cancer and HIV, and difficulty in getting married.²⁹

Young people have the highest risk of infection. Girls' bodies are more vulnerable to infection than those of adult women. The cervical mucous of a girl is more conducive to microorganisms.³⁰ Girls are ten times more vulnerable to pelvic inflammatory disease, an affliction accompanying chlamydia and gonorrhea that threatens fertility.³¹ Most of those with the chlamydial form of the disease will face pelvic surgery of some kind, whether to remove organs or to help conceive a child.³² Sexually active girls under 17 years of age have double the rate of cervical cancer of grown women. Cervical cancer is also linked to having many sexual partners.³³ It does not occur in girls who remain virgins.

Youth are at greatest risk also because those who begin sex early will likely have more sexual partners over a lifetime. It is this—not whether each of those relationships was mutually exclusive at the time—that increases the probability of contracting such lethal diseases as AIDS. Medical realities affirm that people, especially the young, are not suited for sex outside of a lifelong monogamous relationship.

Rage and Fear

Finally, the emotional explosion over a sexual betrayal can turn into rage, leading to violence against the former partner or the new lovers. News accounts of teenage murders often describe a broken sexual relationship as the chief motive. Anna, a junior at a northwestern college, tells of a broken sexual relationship veering into fear and violence. When she broke up with one young man, Bill, and started dating a friend of his, she says, "They got into a fight over me right on the street, yelling at each other and circling each other." Police intervened but it was little comfort. "Bill knew where I lived, and I wondered if he was going to start stalking me or something. I wondered if I'd be safe in my own neighborhood."

Daly summarizes the mental and emotional impact of uncommitted sexual intimacy by citing her long experience:

No one prepares young people for these effects: the lowered self-esteem; the despairing sense of having been used; the self-contempt for being a user; the embarrassment of having a reputation that puts you outside the circle of people with true integrity; the unease about having to lie or at least having to conceal one's activities from family members and others; the extreme difficulty of breaking the vicious cycle of compulsive sexual behavior; and the self-hatred of seeking, after each break-up, someone else to seduce in order to revive one's fading self-image. No one tells students that it sometimes takes years to recover from the effects of these sexual involvements—if one ever recovers.³⁴

Impact on Relationships

"Sex always changes the dynamics of a relationship," observes McDowell.³⁵ When uncommitted adolescents appropriate a distinctive part of the spouse's sphere—sexual bonding—for a relationship that is essentially an extension of the sibling's sphere, they have the worse parts of both worlds. They can no longer enjoy the full growth and pleasures of their friendship nor can they reap the rewards of married love. Beyond the partner, their relations with friends, other peers and potential marriage partners are compromised, as well as the bond with parents and other elders. Premarital sex jeopardizes even the most promising relationships, and its impact can extend into a future marriage as well.

Stress with Parents and Friends

When their children enter into sexual relations outside the formal process of marriage, parents can feel disrespected and hurt, their intrinsic interests ignored, their values compromised. The breach can be difficult to mend. "When my father found out I was having sex, he was really hurt. It's not like he disowned me, but our relationship hasn't been the same," says Sarah, 17, from Indianapolis. Though she feels she loves her boyfriend, "I love my father, too, and I never thought about how he'd feel."³⁶

Friendships are certainly affected too. Krista, a high school senior from Kentucky, tells of how a sexual relationship changed a circle of friends: "We just used to hang out at each other's houses, all very casual. My best friend was eyeing Buddy but he wasn't really interested. But then Buddy and I got more involved and pretty soon we got into a physical relationship. I'll never forget my best friend's face, all tear-streaked and angry, when she said, 'Did you sleep with him?' She eventually went and made another best friend. Nobody hung out together anymore. It was just Buddy and me. Then his family moved to another town and we broke up."

Sexual involvement can turn close friends into bitter enemies overnight. Nothing—not power, money or beliefs—is as divisive as sexual jealousy. Indeed, sometimes a crowd of adolescents can feel like a sticky web of sexual attraction, possessiveness, jealousy, rivalry and betrayal. All intentions become suspect. Is this just a hug or an invita-

tion to something more? Does she want a friend or a sexual partner? Or is she just trying to make someone else jealous?

Problems with Partners

The expression, "Once burned, twice shy" applies to many people who emotionally withdraw and refuse to trust anyone as a potential partner after the heartache of the breakup of a sexual relationship. The remembered pain of betrayal stands in the way of giving themselves trustingly to anyone else. As a Rod Stewart song of the sexual revolution era termed it, everyone becomes "Scarred and Scared." A college senior described how a night of sex ruined what had been a promising friendship in high school, and the pain of that break-up damaged his ability to trust and to find love for many years: "I didn't go out again until I got to college. I've had mostly one-night stands in the last couple of years. I'm afraid of falling in love."³⁷

Frequently, the introduction of sex derails a warm and caring friendship that might well have been a good basis for marriage. Ryan, a teacher in Vermont, recalls his long-time close friendship with the "girl next door" that everyone thought would lead to marriage. "We didn't need sex and didn't want it. But everyone expected us to be sexually involved, so finally we decided maybe we were missing something.... [We had sex and] afterwards our relationship changed. We felt different about each other and what we had just faded away. I still regret that."

At the same time, the bonding power of sex can also lead people to prolong an unhealthy relationship that is based on physical attractiveness or a need for security. Consequently, some teenagers feel trapped in a relationship they don't really want but don't know how to get out of. One girl confessed, "I truly regret that my first time was with a guy I didn't care that much about. I am still going out with him, which is getting to be a problem. I'd like to end this relationship and date others, but after being so intimate, it's awfully tough."³⁸

What enhances unselfishness in a committed relationship can multiply selfishness in an insecure one, leading to more tensions and conflict. The pleasures of sex too readily invite rationalization of expectation and demand. "Since that first night, he expects sex on every date, like we are married or something. When I don't feel like it, we end up in an argument. It's like I owe it to him," Denise, a high-school junior complains. In fact, sexual involvement outside of marriage, especially

among live-in lovers, is associated with more violence and other forms of abuse than among the married.³⁹ (See Chapter 19)

Physical intimacy leaves the heart yearning for comparable emotional intimacy. Yet ironically, sex makes that longing harder to fulfill.⁴⁰ Sex can easily come to overpower any meaningful communication or other healthy activities together. A 22-year-old male student, a virgin, said, "I've seen too many of my friends break up after their relationships turned physical. The emotional wreckage is horrendous because they have already shared something so powerful. When you use sex too early, it will block other means of communicating love and can stunt the balanced growth of the relationship."⁴¹

Consequences for Future Marriage

The effects of premature sexual experiences do not end when young people enter into the world of marriage and parenthood. A person rarely forgets a sexual partner, even if he or she wants to. Those who have engaged in premarital sex may find that they are haunted by the images of past partners, even in the marriage bed. This involuntary comparison of previous lovers to their spouse can be not only disturbing to them, but also disconcerting to the spouse, if known. Who likes to have their husband or wife comparing their body or performance to a lover in the past? One young husband observed, "Whenever I kiss my wife or engage in love play, my memory reminds me that this girl could kiss better than my wife, that that girl was better at something else, and so forth. I can't concentrate on loving my wife with all that I have—there have been too many women in my life to be wholly committed to one."⁴² Likewise, these days there are many young wives who develop a feeling of scorn for their husbands who cannot measure up to idealized memories of past partners.⁴³

Worse, studies show the habit of surrendering to sexual feelings before marriage can prove to be a serious problem at some stressful time with a spouse.⁴⁴ If young men and women are unable to practice sexual integrity before marriage, what will guarantee their ability to do so after the wedding? At that point, succumbing to the old habit would be devastating to the mate, marriage and child.

After many uncommitted relationships, sex may lose its power to build intimacy with the one chosen to be a lifetime companion. Like glue, sex does not bond as well when reused again and again. The

bonding power may grow feebler after having already imprinted the heart and mind with previous partners. An opposite problem emerges when early disappointing experiences can lead either to an aversion to sex or a feeling of boredom with it. This can take years to overcome, even after becoming married.

"Sexual activity only celebrates what is there. Sex cannot deliver what does not already exist," states William McCready of the University of Chicago.⁴⁵ In the context of a committed marriage and the mutual trust and unconditional love it provides, sexual relations amplify the already present atmosphere of understanding, acceptance and intimacy. Without that commitment, sex only aggravates insecurity, lack of trust and misunderstanding, making real intimacy harder to attain.

The Culture of Uncommitted Sexual Relationships

Most adults who are uncomfortable with teenage sex clearly see its negative consequences. They agree that immature teenagers should be encouraged in abstinence, in their own self-interest and in the interest of society.⁴⁶ Yet, when adolescents decide on sex outside of marriage and unwed parenthood, are they not simply following the example of their elders?

Most of the social problems associated with nonmarital sex involve adults. Over 80 percent of pregnancies outside of marriage in the U.S. are to women over 20. Teenagers under 18 account for only 13 percent.⁴⁷ The numbers are similar for abortions,⁴⁸ and most STDs are also among adults.

It is certainly not easy to explain why the same behavior that is so risky and irresponsible for a girl on one side of age 20 is merely a "personal decision" for a young woman on the other side. Are the prospects for a typical 23-year-old single mother and her baby considerably better than those facing an 18-year-old single mother? Are all the other negative psychological, relational and social consequences significantly different for adolescent boys and girls as opposed to men and women?

The first generation shaped by the sexual revolution thinks they are. While three out of four Americans frown upon teenagers having sex before marriage, less than half believe that it is always wrong for adults to do it. The majority under age 45 thinks that sex outside

of marriage is generally beneficial for finding a good spouse and for other reasons apart from pleasure.⁴⁹

Here lies the heart of the problem: adult attitudes and behavior favoring non-monogamy. If adults do not expect marriage to be the context to find romantic and sexual fulfillment and to raise children, then why should teenagers behave differently? This is especially true when society accepts that a good marriage is a dim prospect.

Teenage Sex and the Loss of the Marriage Culture

What is striking about teenage birth rates today as contrasted with those in the 1950s and 60s—besides being actually lower—is that in the past teenage parents used to be married.⁵⁰ The issue today is not how many get pregnant but how few get married. The decline of adult respect for marriage as the context for sex has left little incentive for youth to postpone sex. Setting age as the guideline does not work. Certainly being told that before a magic age, having sex or a child—or even getting married—is a bad idea but afterwards anything goes is “hardly likely to capture their moral imagination,” as Maggie Gallagher put it. “Does it capture yours?”⁵¹ If marriage is not the decisive event worth waiting for, then why is an arbitrary age?

What’s worse, once marriage is no longer expected, engaging in particularly hazardous sexual behavior may even seem to be a substitute way to show special love and loyalty. Gallagher observes, “If it is not marriage that confers special meaning to the sexual act, then perhaps it is [a girl] giving the gift of unprotected sex, or making a baby.” Indeed, in one avant-garde movie about a man who died of AIDS, the camera reveals him making love with his girlfriend and then pans dramatically to the unused condom on the bedside table. An unused piece of latex now represents the nobility of a lover’s sacrifice.

Given a culture allergic to committed monogamy, adolescent sexual relations are not hard to understand. To be sure, it is harder to fathom why they would want to wait.

Adult Complicity in Teenage Sex

Some experts are blunt about adult complicity in youthful experimentation. "The 'raging hormones' argument is nonsense," says John Gagnon. "Society elicits sexual behavior in kids."⁵² However, the critical role the adult sexual ethic plays in the sexual behavior of the young is a reality hard for parents, teachers and other adults to accept. Even prominent advocates of character education and traditional family values are reluctant to take a stand on the issue of adult sex outside of marriage.⁵³ If making hard and fast guidelines for adolescent sexual behavior is a divisive issue, doing the same with adult sexual behavior is for many out of the question.

A society that is ambivalent in its sexual standards for adults cannot expect its youth to live moral and healthy sexual lives. Example is the strongest teacher. The single mother whose date slept over last night, the teacher physically involved with a student, the coach having an affair with a married woman—not to mention the movies and music endlessly depicting the glories of unmarried sex—none of this goes unnoticed.

Sexual permissiveness also makes it harder to establish other moral boundaries. "Sex before marriage has proven to be the runaway horse of traditional values. Once it took off, all the other old-time mores became more difficult to keep in their place," concludes author David Whitman.⁵⁴ In fact, virtue becomes turned on its head. A consistent theme in articles on celebrity parenthood out of wedlock is that it is, in the words of Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "not only...a way to find happiness but also as a way to exhibit such virtues as honesty and courage."⁵⁵ Uncommitted sex is conveyed as downright ennobling.

Related to this is the way tolerance of nonmarital sex undermines parents' and other adults' sense of moral authority. Afraid of appearing hypocritical, elders may feel helpless to advise youth to act in ways they themselves have not and are unable to do. The net effect is that adolescents are denied the clear sexual guidance they want and need. "People say 'Use a condom,'" says Stephanie Brown, a Planned Parenthood teen clinic director in Northern California, "but not 'Why are you having sex with this person?'" As author Nellie Bernstein observed, "We talk to young people as if their genitals are a matter of public concern, but their souls are none of our business."⁵⁶

Adult tolerance of teenage sexual activity can also be more self-serving than it is comfortable to face. It can be easier for elders to

remain silent or merely help a boy or girl acquire contraceptives rather than to risk being judged by their own standards and face changing old habits. William Galston, board member of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, concedes: "We believe what we believe about premarital sex because it is convenient for us to do so."⁵⁷

Certainly it facilitates the exploitation of girls by older men. A fact expediently underplayed in the discussion of "teenage" pregnancy and disease is that many are encounters between minors and adults or near-adults. The majority of pregnant girls began their sexual activity as a result of being raped or abused by men 27 years old on average.⁵⁸ California research suggests that over half of births to girls 11 to 15 involve males over 19.⁵⁹ National studies indicate that one in five births to teenage mothers 15 to 17 years of age involve men over 21.⁶⁰ There is evidence that most cases of girls infected with STDs are due to liaisons with adult men, who are four times as likely to be infected as boys.⁶¹ To help "prevent junior high sex," researcher Mike Males points out, it is necessary "to lecture grown-ups."⁶²

Of course adults retain their prerogative to make personal sexual decisions; this is a given. However, it serves no purpose to pretend that apart from the grossest of abuses, these decisions are morally equivalent and of less consequence to the young than they really are. What adults do—what they are—always affects others around them, especially the next generation. Committed monogamy in marriage honors this moral reality. If the sexual culture of even a small but influential group of adults—perhaps parents and teachers—shifts towards a healthy and responsible sexual ethic, the sexual attitudes and behavior of the young can also change.

Today's pervasive culture of sex outside of marriage has made virginity into an act of deviance. Adult virgin Neal Bernards asserts that sex has become the "drug of choice," and those who abstain are seen as "aberrant, abnormal and even dangerous."⁶³ Yet young people drawn into the maelstrom of nonmarital sex are at risk. Beyond the commonly recognized risks of pregnancy and disease, there are psychological hazards and damage to future relationships. These risks are often overlooked, yet they take a very real toll.

To spare the young these hazards, a progressive and responsible norm is necessary. Setting up two separate standards for youth and adults based on arbitrary ages is unworkable. So is grounding it in self-assessments of maturity or states of feeling or other subjective and

unreliable criteria. The only viable standard is one based on an act of will, a promise that establishes a definite reference point for the partners and for the many others who are affected. In truth, a responsible ethic of sexual love would have to assert the currently unpopular notion that all sex in insecure relationships is self-defeating and irresponsible. If sexuality is to be fully enjoyed and its fruits love-enhancing and life-enriching, then its context can only be committed, lifelong, mutually faithful monogamy—in other words, marriage.

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Addressing Objections to Monogamy

THE STANDARD OF COMMITTED, LIFELONG, MUTUALLY FAITHFUL monogamy¹—that is, abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage—has traditionally been exalted as the virtue of chastity. Excesses and injustices in enforcing this traditional code have contributed to its rejection in recent times. Many commonly held notions pose obstacles to parents, educators and others interested in reinvigorating this norm. These are notions about sexual needs, knowledge, pleasure and regard for the body, personal growth, the double standard, and guilt. In addition, some adults have qualms about being hypocritical if they advocate marriage and abstinence to the young. Educating for healthy and responsible sexual love necessarily means addressing these concerns and objections.

Issues of Human Nature

Can people meet their sexual needs while practicing premarital abstinence and marital fidelity?

A 1991 sex survey of students at a northeastern college found that about 20 percent affirmed the statement, “the more fun a person has, the sounder he or she will be psychologically.”² This reflects the belief

that sex is not only an urge but also a need that must be met, like food or sleep, or else there is a risk to mental and physical health. It follows that it is unreasonable to expect people to forego sex, especially if they are in difficult situations—a bad marriage, widowhood, unable to marry, and so on. The argument goes that because of this need, a large proportion of people have always engaged in premarital and extramarital sex, even if it was kept a secret.

The notion that sexual inactivity in itself is a threat to psychological health is dubious. Hundreds of thousands—3 percent—of Americans have remained celibate throughout their lives³ and millions have waited to begin sexual involvement until age thirty and beyond with no proven ill effects. Over 80 percent of Americans under age 60 have had either one or no sex partner in a given year.⁴ A corollary is that among married couples, cheating is the great exception.⁵ When opportunity for sex is not available for long periods of time—in military service for example—interest in it has been known to drop off to nil.⁶ Furthermore, sex experts say that one reason married couples may find themselves having little or no sex is that they simply get out of the habit.

Sexual abstinence is, in the words of Gabrielle Brown, author of an exhaustive study of celibacy, “the rest state of sexuality, where the sexual response becomes more diffuse, expanding in many directions beyond a simple genital response.” Rather than a state of repression or frustration, it can simply represent a redirection of sexual impulses.⁷ As Masters and Johnson have stated, “In one respect, sex is like no other physical process... [it] can be denied indefinitely, even for a lifetime.” In fact, some experts question if it is even a drive at all since it is so amenable to learning and will. “Sex is a natural urge, but the role it plays in your life and the importance you attribute to it... is a matter of free choice,” concludes psychologist Peter Koestenbaum.⁸ The notion of compelling sexual needs comes chiefly from discredited studies conducted in the 1950s, notably the specious work of Alfred Kinsey, who is coming under increasing fire for bias and using unsound sampling techniques.⁹ (See Chapter 23)

Controlling the sexual urge is obviously what most people must do most of the time. Even when a partner is available as in marriage, circumstances such as illness, work, pregnancy, menstrual cycle and the demands of parenthood dictate a large measure of self-control. Thus, any reasonably functional person needs to learn sexual self-restraint.

The prevailing view assumes people need physical gratification

more than they do, and this produces its own negative fallout. In the past those with strong sexual desire struggled with feelings of abnormality and those with few scruples had to justify why their partner should give in. Now the situation appears reversed. Single and married people wonder if they are abnormal if they do not desire sex as much as they hear they should. Those with lower desire or reservations about sex outside of marriage face pressure to satisfy the demands of more aggressive partners, because it is after all "healthy" and "normal."

Unreasonably high expectations of sexual interest and readiness produce as much pressure as the past taboos,¹⁰ with perhaps more destructive results. The chief worry of girls 12 years and older is sexual pressure, not only from boys but also from other girls, friends and the media.¹¹ Thus young people push themselves into sexual involvement earlier and in more insecure situations than they would otherwise be inclined to. One 23-year-old woman had her first sexual experience because "virginity was like a tiny but oppressive burden that I always carried around with me; it was great to get rid of it."

Isn't monogamy unnatural?

"Homo sapiens is a promiscuous species," asserts clinical psychologist Jules Older.¹² Arguments abound that biology dictates that men and women pursue a variety of sexual partners, like polygamous primates. Therefore, self-restraint is not only difficult, it is almost hopeless.

However, this argument does not hold when considering the basic difference between humans and promiscuous primates like chimpanzees. Male chimpanzees are not concerned about the welfare of their offspring, or even which baby is theirs. Human fathers on the other hand love their sons and daughters. And well they should, from a biological perspective; human children require a great deal of parental nurturing. If human fathers want their children to thrive, they need to make a sizeable investment in both the children and their mother. The mother needs to make a similar investment.

In unstable communities where crime, early death and other conditions create extreme stress, it might make genetic sense for males to impregnate as many females as possible and for females to have babies unmindful of the fathers—in other words, to act like chimpanzees—to ensure that some of their offspring might survive. But a healthy human

norm it is not. Monogamy and marriage support the prospering of the human species and favor the individual's posterity. It is no accident that enduring societies worldwide have affirmed the marriage norm. The myth of more "natural" sexually permissive societies propagated by an earlier generation of anthropologists like Margaret Mead has been exposed as wishful thinking.¹³

The Social Value of Monogamy

Since the dawn of time, enduring societies, including those most economically successful, have been monogamous.¹⁴ Cambridge professor J. D. Unwin studied eighty-eight societies and discovered, contrary to his expectations, that all favored premarital abstinence and marital fidelity. When they abandoned this sexual ethic they perished within a few generations.¹⁵

A key reason why monogamy works best is that it is "democratic." Every man has an equal opportunity to have a woman and have children. "Polygamy creates a clear social order, with distinct winners and losers," especially among men, observes sociologist William Tucker. Outwardly attractive men—those with looks, money and status—get as many women as they can afford. Other men lose out, even those with the inner traits that would enable them to be better husbands and fathers. The scarcity of women encourages such practices as the bride price which further narrows the chances for less affluent men, or arranged marriages between older men and younger girls, which creates an unlikely context for a happy marriage.¹⁶

Thus, there arises the "bachelor herd" of single men with no legitimate way to meet their heart's need to enter the conjugal and parental spheres of love, or even of their physical desire for sex. These discouraged men end up fighting for alliances with the high-status men and for dominance among themselves, not to mention taking out their frustrations by terrorizing the populace. In the U.S., single male teenagers and young adults commit 90 percent of violent crime.¹⁷

Monogamy, on the other hand, reduces sexual competitiveness among men. This makes male cooperation possible, and allows men and women to work together in a non-sexual setting. In this way, monogamy permits and sustains democratic government and the generation and distribution of wealth. Since it is also better for the nurturance of children, it naturally cultivates stronger and more productive citizens. Middle-class families, aspiring to better themselves, tend to prize premarital abstinence and marital fidelity. With much to gain and much to lose, they are neither secure enough to be cavalier about sexual norms, nor hopeless enough not to care. It is when the middle class abandons this innate caution and begins to imitate the racy lifestyles among the class above or below them that society is most at risk.

Monogamy—and the constellation of attitudes and practices that uphold and protect it—is not only good for individuals, spouses and children. It is good for society, too. “The long-standing, almost universal dislike and disapproval of child-bearing out of wedlock, of sexual infidelity, of public prostitution and pornography... these are not just irrational intolerances,” asserts Tucker. “They are the ancient, forgotten logic that holds together a monogamous society.”¹⁸

Doesn't this ethic reinforce ignorance and superstition?

There is truth to the criticism that traditional norms inhibited open discussion of sexuality and thus encouraged ignorance. Yet while contemporary attitudes have eliminated old superstitions—that women do not enjoy sex, for example, it has created new ones—that consensual sex is always beneficial or at least harmless. The assumption that the more permissive ethic is more rational and informed by social science is a shaky one. Recent decades have brought an avalanche of hard data on human sexuality that explodes many contemporary myths—that sex is best for young singles, that cohabitation is beneficial, that men lose out in marriage or that most spouses cheat.¹⁹

An enlightened sexual ethic today recognizes the importance of knowledge and understanding about love and sexuality. These need to

be conveyed in an age-appropriate way and within an ethical framework. The ample evidence for the benefits of marriage, even for sexual satisfaction, also deserves a complete airing.

Isn't this ethic ultimately anti-sex, anti-body and anti-pleasure?

For some, the fear of dampening sexual pleasure is greater than any other. "Parents worry less about preventing their children's sexual activity than they do about inhibiting their sexual feeling," observes Helen Kaplan, director of the Human Sexuality Program at the Cornell Medical Center.²⁰ Ironically, sex in insecure relationships generates its own problems in this area. One experienced teenager says she gets "a massive body headache" just thinking about sex. Others say they "freak out" either beforehand or afterwards, contemplating the possible fallout.²¹ Is this conducive to sexual pleasure?

A progressive yet responsible expression of the ethic of premarital abstinence and marital fidelity is "sex positive." It can point to the enhanced eroticism and pleasure available through a monogamous relationship. Over 85 percent of married people report enjoying great sexual pleasure, and as many speak of being quite emotionally gratified as well.²² The safety, trust and familiarity of a lifelong partner set up the context for fully exploring the possibilities of sexual love. Sexuality deserves to be appreciated and celebrated in all of its depth and power, neither trivialized nor demonized. Within its rightful context and in the spirit of ethical love, there are no limits to exploring and enjoying its profound meaning, beauty and joys.

Doesn't monogamy restrict personal growth?

Implicit in this objection is a positive regard for diverse experiences of any kind. Therefore, enjoying various sexual partners is considered more enriching and broadening. Indeed there is even the connotation that it is more courageous to do so, demonstrating a greater desire for self-actualization. In the survey of college sexual attitudes noted above, more than half of the students agreed with the notion that "Premarital sex is all right if it increases the capacity to trust, brings greater integrity to personal relationships, dissolves barriers separating people, enhances self-respect, and fosters a zest for living."²³ However, as discussed in the previous chapter, premarital sex actually has the opposite effect a great deal of the time.

A related idea is that sexual satisfaction is a growth-producing phenomenon in and of itself. In this view, exploring all the dimensions of sexual experience is a positive good. One partner is considered unlikely to provide the full range of potential sexual experiences. To be sure, uncommitted sexual encounters can be revealing about love and the self. However, the truth is that monogamy is far more demanding and growthful. To wait for and invest in one person in such a way as to sustain and renew love may seem impossibly demanding, but it is precisely this context that stretches every faculty and promotes the greatest personal growth. (See Chapter 17)

It is only too easy to run to another partner instead of facing the deeper issues that real and enduring intimacy demands. In the words of human potential philosopher George Leonard, "It is easy to associate multiple sexual partners with personal change and monogamy with personal stasis.... But extramarital affairs and pursuit of recreational sex are far more likely to be associated with the avoidance of change."²⁴ In a lifelong commitment, a person must face him or herself deeply—there is no escape. This leads to authentic expansion of the heart and building of the character, not the superficial changes that come about in more temporary and uncommitted relationships. This is why psychiatrist Viktor Frankl maintained that monogamy fosters the inner growth needed to share true love.²⁵

Personal growth logically relates to maturity. Psychologist Abraham Maslow noticed that one trait of self-actualized people was a deep appreciation of sexual love, yet the ability to tolerate its absence well.²⁶ A full definition of maturity naturally includes self-control in the sexual arena just as it includes self-control regarding time, anger, sleep and other matters. Most adults would be embarrassed to oversleep for an appointment, to shout in a business meeting, or worse, to be unable to control their toilet habits. Yet they can be unashamed of sexual indiscretions.

Indeed, sexual self-discipline is a defining task of instinctual control during adolescence. It is similar to toilet training for the young child. Just as the child feels proud and "grown up" when he or she has mastered continence, so the teenager can learn to find pride in and equate maturity with sexual abstinence. "My dad says a real man controls himself. I'm strong enough to wait," says Makeem, a high school senior.

In addition, monogamy supports the fundamental integrity that comprises maturity by keeping the body aligned with the conscience and deepest heart. The body has its own language: a fist means hostile-

ity; a smile signifies good will. If a smile conceals malice, it is a deception, a misuse of the language of the body. In this vein, sexual coupling represents the total union of hearts, minds and lives. When physical union is merely for pleasure or as an expression of warm feelings, this too can be considered a deception. Dishonesty like this is incompatible with reaching moral wholeness and maturity.

Doesn't the sexual modesty and restraint that this kind of ethic implies encourage sexual inhibitions?

The current sexual climate assumes it is better to be rid of artificial boundaries between the sexes and to be frank about people's sexual desires and the naked body. Progressive men and women are supposed to be comfortable with nudity and sexual talk, and to prefer a straightforward negotiation of sexual favors.

However, sexual restraint in dress and manners is innate in people cross-culturally, even among peoples who wear few clothes. Western women who are scantily dressed often expend a lot of energy trying to keep themselves as covered as their clothes allow. Sexual modesty has the effect of preventing distractions and leaves men and women free to relate to each other as personalities instead of bodies.²⁷

In a world that denies modesty, like many college dormitories where men and women daily share bathrooms and bedrooms, young people end up tuning out the eroticized environment in order to survive. With this goes some capacity for emotional closeness as well. Even attempts at serious romantic relationships end up, in ethicist Daniel Mahoney's words, "oddly disengaged"—emotionally cool while physically hot.²⁸

Sexual modesty is protective. It is the corollary to the sharing of confidences only with intimate friends. It reflects the privacy of hopes and dreams, the withholding of the deepest recesses of the self only for a worthy person.

Doesn't this ethic encourage guilt?

Opponents of the monogamy ethic point to the harsh way people are stigmatized for trying to cope with their sexual urges, especially those not happily married. This is said to produce such guilt that even between husbands and wives neurotic attitudes persist and damage sexual satisfaction.

It is true that past taboos in support of monogamy could be cruelly applied even against victims of rape. It is also true that setting any kind of standards means a certain stigma is inevitable for those who breach them. In the present climate, there are still people being stigmatized, only now it is those who resist uncommitted sex. "Virgin" has become an epithet. Girls who favor marriage over racking up a complex sexual history have had to hide their "dark" secret.²⁹ Boys who want to respect themselves and girls by being abstinent feel the need to lie about it or have their sexual orientation or normality questioned.

An ethic of healthy and ethical sexuality stigmatizes what is unhealthy, hurtful and irresponsible. At the same time victims of sex crimes deserve compassion. This is possible when the goal is not punitive but to help people find their way to optimal satisfaction, health and growth.

Neurotic guilt can be a real hazard for romantic and sexual happiness. Encouraging self-control without promoting neurotic guilt is the goal of all who would guide young people. But, of course, not all guilt is unhealthy. Healthy guilt has its roots in empathy and connectedness to others.³⁰ It protects sexuality by keeping it humane and meaningful.

The solution to unhealthy guilt is not to lower moral standards. Instead, it is to convey a sense of normal desires and struggles, so youth can better put their situation in perspective. Second, adolescents can learn how to handle their mistakes with compassion towards themselves. Parents and educators do this by modeling that sensitivity.

Issues of Relationships

Isn't sex a natural way to express love?

It is true love to want only the best for the beloved and the relationship. Sexual expression in an uncommitted relationship will expose both partners—not to mention a host of others close to the partners—to emotional, physical and relational risks neither can control. These consequences may last much longer than the warm feelings do. Premarital abstinence as a lifestyle, on the other hand, enhances the capacity to give unselfish love. Therefore, partners who genuinely love each other wait until they can create the setting where the physical intimacy can only enrich each other's hearts and lives in the long term.

Isn't a committed relationship equivalent to marriage?

It is understandable that when singles lack the confidence to formalize their commitment, when the divorce-weary would rather not go through it again, when some people are unable to legally wed, this question arises. Isn't living together sufficient commitment to legitimate physical intimacy?

The issue is whether an informal arrangement is able to contain all the potentially life-changing results of sexual union—a pregnancy, the birth of a child, emotional bonds and expectations. Unstable relationships do not allow the trust needed even for maximum sexual satisfaction, let alone handling a pregnancy and other possible outcomes. Given that even half of engagements break up, a committed relationship that will not pledge loyalty before the mate, family and community is simply not very committed. (See Chapter 19)

Doesn't prior sexual experience make for better marital sex?

"You should be good in bed with someone before you marry him," says dancer Nicole, "and you probably should sleep with a few people so you know what it's all about."³¹ It is a prevalent belief that sexual experience at least with the prospective spouse will make a person a better lover when married.

This application of "practice makes perfect" may sound logical but research does not bear it out. One survey suggests women who are virgins when they marry report a greater degree of sexual pleasure and satisfaction, while women who began their sexual activity as unwed teenagers have more dissatisfaction with their sexual experiences as adults.³² Given sexual "flashbacks" and the many other disadvantages of premarital sex and cohabitation discussed in the previous chapter, sexual experience before marriage is far from helpful.

Exclusive Claims of Sexual Love

A study found that men had an involuntary negative reaction to the thought of their mate having sex with another man; the women reacted negatively to the idea of their mate having a strong emotional involvement with another woman.³³ This is not surprising. Studies indicate one of the most universal of taboos in all societies worldwide is infidelity. Men and women react viscerally to the idea of their partners sharing themselves intimately with someone else.

Mature human love differs from animal love in that it is keenly aware of the unique individuality of the beloved. No matter how promiscuous people may be, few want to feel that they are replaceable in the eyes of their lover. Even the unfaithful would prefer that their spouse be faithful to them.

It is a curiosity of romantic love that lovers have a sense of belonging to the beloved. "You own my heart," they say to each other. Thus they make promises of undying commitment and share their fortunes and futures, all they have and ever will have with one another. The most treasured gift is their exclusive affection and trust, and implicit is exclusive sexual involvement.

In this sense, the genital organs symbolize the desire of the heart for conjugal union. Neither the heart nor the sexual parts can find complete fulfillment without the beloved. Indeed, they are connected, one moving the other. There is a mysterious link of reinforcement between the communion of lovers' hearts and union of their genitals.

This is why a husband and wife feel a natural claim on both their beloved's love and sexual expression. Legal codes have historically recognized these expectations as "conjugal rights." This sense of entitlement or proprietorship, of course, is necessarily in the spirit of respect and care.

From this perspective, a sound ethic of sexual love can be reduced to a simple universal code: an individual's sexual expression is reserved solely for his or her spouse.

What about the double standard?

Monogamy is often tied to an entire system of male domination of women. "Marriage was a business deal," say authors Susan Jonas and Marilyn Nissenson. "Since women were regarded as property, a defiled bride meant... 'damaged goods.'"³⁴ Males have been free to indulge themselves at the expense of females, who were perceived to have limited sexual desire. Women would seldom find sexual satisfaction yet they would pay the price for any illicit liaisons through stigma as well as pregnancies and other burdens. One extension of this view is that to counteract this injustice, women have to claim their right to sexual pleasure and beat men at their own game of sexual domination. Female promiscuity is thus the exercise of women's power and independence.

The problem with this argument is that the double standard is abandoned in favor of a lower standard for both genders. Feminist Sally Cline asserts women are trying to inherit men's innate weakness—the penchant for separating the body from the heart and sex from responsibility and love—instead of passing on feminine strengths.³⁵

Girls are now expected to want many sexual partners. Boys are expected to treat girls as if they do. The result is many females have to deny their more relational and monogamous romantic inclinations. They also have to deny their natural instincts of self-protection: birth-control or not, females carry the greater burden of sex outside of a secure relationship. And the double standard still prevails in the "safer sex" world, where they face the greater responsibility to supply condoms or otherwise use contraception.³⁶

A fair ethic of premarital abstinence and marital fidelity applies to both men and women. Obviously, men cannot be rewarded for promiscuity while women are penalized and held solely accountable for controlling them. Nor can the pretense be maintained that males and females are the same in sexual response and needs or in bearing the consequences of sexual acts.³⁷ Even in the present sexually permissive climate, women think in terms of fewer sexual partners than men do. One study revealed that the number of partners single men

desired in the following two years was six, while for single women it was only one.³⁸ Not all sexual differences are the result of oppression.³⁹ These intrinsic gender strengths and weaknesses require some consideration.

This is the origin of the traditional codes of male and female honor. Men agree not to use their superior physical strength to take advantage of women, nor to exploit the female susceptibility to promises of love and security. Women agree not to use men's vulnerability to visual arousal and emotional manipulation against them. These codes made distinctions between the genders, and so they were laden with sex discrimination. Nevertheless, they also protected men and women and thus created the context for greater freedom and trust between them.⁴⁰ One look at contemporary culture suggests that some form of these codes needs to be revived. Young people, in Mahoney's words, "worry about date rape, because nobody knows what is permitted and what is not. Sex has become like a football field without any lines; sure, you can't step out of bounds, but it is not clear how to play the game anymore."⁴¹

The ethic of monogamy sets up rules binding upon both genders equally. It helps avoid mutual exploitation, using the opposite sex as an emotional crutch, pawn or object of revenge.⁴² As such it represents real power, freedom and independence for women as well as men.

Issues of Advocacy

How can adults advocate abstinence outside marriage when they did not or do not practice it themselves?

Many well-intentioned parents, teachers and others responsible for youth hesitate to promote abstinence because they themselves did not practice it when younger or are even now violating that standard. They fear to be judged a hypocrite. This is reminiscent of the issue often faced by those involved in character education: How can teachers advocate such high standards when so many adults fail to live up to them? Sexual abstinence and marital fidelity, like honest business practices, truthful journalism and a host of other norms, represent high standards that are worth striving for. When conscientious people fail to keep a certain standard, they feel remorse, make amends and try again. They continue to advocate it for themselves and others; they do not deny its validity simply because it is hard.

No parents want their child to repeat their mistakes. Just because adults did or do not exemplify the healthiest and most responsible standard in their lives does not mean they can do nothing to teach youth how to live better than they did. The sorry smoker will try to steer her students clear of tobacco. The repentant career criminal will encourage his nephew towards an honorable occupation. The now wiser unwed single mother wants her daughter to find a boy to marry before having a child. This is only natural.

The once-promiscuous parent may say, "I regret the bad choices I made in the past. You can understand these matters better than I did at your age and avoid my mistakes. This is your advantage." Adults who admit their mistakes win the admiration of young people and reestablish their moral authority as well.

At the same time, this assumes the adults are making a sincere attempt to practice what they are now preaching. Concern about hypocrisy is valid. Those who are in a position to influence youth have reason to examine their behavior from the standpoint of a parental heart. Is it what they would really want the young to emulate?

Just as adolescents are wary of hypocrisy, they are also alert to self-serving evasiveness. They respond to sincerity and honesty. A high school student appealed to an audience of parents and educators to "tell us your experiences, your hard times with love and sex and what you've learned."⁴³ Elders have no need to give detailed confessions, but they can share from the heart about their successes and failures and why they advocate the highest standard.⁴⁴ It is the nature of the younger generation to want to do better than their elders. By encouraging their best instincts, adults are at the same time fostering a healthier ethos over the long run that will make the optimal standard easier and easier to live by.

How can adults encourage youth to marry when many of them can't model it themselves?

As with the abstinence standard, many adults who have divorced or otherwise have not been successful in establishing a satisfying marriage feel uncomfortable advocating a marriage norm. For some it is more than concern about hypocrisy. They are genuinely ambivalent about the chances of young people to do better in marriage than they.

No one wants to foster false hopes, yet again the parental heart

naturally focuses solely on one question: "What is in this young person's best interests?" When adults convey that finding a suitable mate, marrying and sustaining the marriage are too difficult, they are giving up on the young and relegating them to lives of unsatisfying liaisons that at best mimic what they really want. However well meant, this is ultimately a betrayal.

The alternatives to monogamous marriage are not ones that most would wish on youth. There used to be the myth of the swinging 20-something single life full of self-discovery and sexual experimentation followed by marriage or a committed relationship and possibly children when 30-something. This, however, has not been played out in reality. Without even considering the emotional scars, STDs, infertility due to waiting too long and other issues, the painful reality is that many single adults in their 30s and 40s, especially women, find themselves unable to find a marriageable mate or are unwilling to accommodate a partner in their current lifestyle.⁴⁵ They are facing the prospects of a lonely old age that no amount of social acceptance of singlehood can ameliorate.

Adults are presenting, Nellie Bernstein observes, "fewer and fewer coherent models for conducting and sustaining intimate relationships." Though some may question whether lifelong marriage is viable, at least such a norm has "the advantage of being imitable" and clear.⁴⁶

Divorced adults may not know all about how to make a good marriage work, but they do know something about how it does not work. They have learned much from their experience and teenagers and young adults want to hear it. Adults serve young people when they encourage their dreams of lasting love, steer them away from dead ends and give them the benefit of their experience, not their cynicism.

In addition, there are good reasons to be optimistic about the younger generation's prospects for satisfying marriage, even apart from the declining rate of divorce. The exploding field of marriage education arms youth with more insight and skills than previous generations have ever known. (See Chapter 21) This, coupled with character and abstinence education, can help them achieve the success in love that has so far eluded many of their elders.

An ethic of responsible sexual love can reclaim monogamy and its associated virtues. In the words of educator Mary Patricia Barth Fourqurean, such a perspective and practice is "an empowering strength" that liberates young men and women "from the mixed sig-

nals of sexual games" to enjoy relationships of intimacy, trust and lasting love.⁴⁷

Still, unless youth have the depth of heart and strength of character to resist sexual pressure, they do not have the capacity to actually choose abstinence and fidelity. This is why abstinence education is inescapably linked to effective character education. And unless young people have the understanding and skills to create healthy relationships leading to marriage, they cannot have sufficient hope to choose the responsible ethic either. For this reason, marriage preparation education is a boon. Character education, abstinence education and marriage education form a protective triangle for the support of youths' moral development and their success in achieving loving relationships and sound families.