JUST DON'T DO IT!

ARE WE TEACHING OUR KIDS WAY TOO MUCH ABOUT SEX? OR NOT NEARLY ENOUGH?

Joshua Linen was a high school freshman when he announced, "Hey, Dad, they gave me an ATM card in health class today!" The card can't deliver a dime in cash, but his parents see it as invaluable in terms of Joshua's moral development. ATM in this case stands for abstinence till marriage. Expiration date: wedding day. For the Anaheim, Calif., father and his wife and for Joshua, now a junior, the high school's emphasis on abstinence is exactly right.

But for parents Ed Gold and Amy Robinson, who split their time between Charleston, S.C., and Washington, D.C., the card and the class that went with it are an absolutely wrongheaded way to teach teenagers about sex. "What if they can't just say no?" asks Robinson. "What if they are overwhelmed, or think they are in love, or their bodies overrule their heads? The reality is that children are having sexual experiences younger and younger. I don't understand the concept of not wanting the child to have all the available information. I don't think that's any way to make a child whole."

Etiquette says that to avoid an argument, one should never discuss politics, sex, or religion. And sex education is chock full of all three taboo topics; few discourses have made so many so mad. Still, the question remains: Are we teaching our kids too much about sex? Or too little?

The answer depends on whom you ask. Sex may be a private matter, but sex education is a public one, especially since it is taught in public schools with public funds. The debate over what to teach has ratcheted up in recent years, but the topic has been around for decades. The arguments have remained much the same, but the recommended curriculum has flipped, flopped, and flipped again. The passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981 gave money to educational programs that would "promote self-
discipline and other prudent approaches." But during the '80s and early '90s, as AIDS became an increasing threat, sex ed became "comprehensive." Often taught by educators associated with Planned Parenthood, the classes covered contraception, disease protection, and much more. Then in 1996, as part of the Welfare Reform Act, Congress established a federal program to exclusively fund abstinence-only curricula. "The abstinence-only program really stirred things up," says Deborah Roffman, author of Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide.

End results. California, Pennsylvania, and most recently Maine have chosen to turn down the money and teach what they want. In Franklin County, N.C., the school board ordered that three chapters be sliced out of the ninth-grade health book, including pages that revealed more than the abstinence-only state law allowed.

But that doesn't mean sex ed is the same the state over. Because one man's (or woman's) fancy may be too broad for one and too conservative for another, curriculum decisions tend to be made locally, sometimes in favor of the majority and sometimes to grease the squeakiest wheels. Current sexuality education curricula vary from graphic to limited, ranging from in-school comprehensive presentations by Planned Parenthood to abstinence-only courses, which often rely on outside lecturers who, critics charge, sometimes present the subject from a Christian point of view. Course content doesn't just differ from "red state" to "blue state" but also from "community to community and ultimately from classroom to classroom," says Monica Rodriguez, vice president for education and training at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, an organization that promotes sexuality education. Time is another variant. Some schools spend a total of two hours on sex ed; others, a full semester.

Granting that this is a topic fraught with dueling statistics and conflicting studies, the generally accepted figure is that only 15 percent of parents want an abstinence-only curriculum. Nonetheless, the movement has steadily gained momentum. Backed by many conservative churches, a vocal group of parents, dozens of conservative organizations, an impressively organized PR campaign, and, since 1996, more than a billion federal and state dollars, the unambiguous message that postponing sex until marriage is the only option is being delivered in 35 percent of public school districts in the United States. (If birth control is discussed in these classes, the focus is on failure rates.) An additional 51 percent of school districts teach abstinence-plus, a course in which chastity is the preferred and safest option but in which information about contraception as a way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is also included. And 14 percent of school districts teach a comprehensive program that can include discussions on abortion, homosexuality, premarital sex, oral and anal sex, and masturbation.

Which means, says Roffman, that no one is doing enough. "We give young people the organ recital, and we do disaster prevention, but we don't do good work helping young people prepare for their adult lives."

The disagreement is deeply ingrained in religious beliefs and ideas that, although discounted by the medical profession, are held as truth. Some abstinence-only advocates say that discussing sex acts can inspire experimentation and fantasies that would otherwise not occur. Some charge that they promote homosexuality. And many point out that some of those practices are contrary to their religious
beliefs. Stepping on anyone's religious beliefs is a problem for many Americans. But so is failure to teach according to the accepted science. "It reminds me of the evolution versus intelligent design theory being taught in science classes," says Christine Coleman, who is a member of Sex Etc., an organization for teens to give other teens correct information about sex.

Grass-roots abstinence organizations have advanced the movement and given abstinence a certain, if limited, cachet. Their video and live programs are as teen-friendly as MTV, encouraging teens to take a no-premarital-sex pledge or, if the teen has already had sex, to stop. Online, kids can "Take the Chastity Challenge" and join a local Pure Love Club. Purity rings, designed to be worn as a reminder to self and a proclamation to others, say virginity is chic, not geek. Some girls wear their belief not on their finger, or even their sleeve, but on their underpants. Among the slogans on WaitWear undies: "Virginity Lane. Exit when married," and "No vows. No sex." The worth-the-wait message was underscored by the well-publicized news flash that pop singer-actress Jessica Simpson waited until her honeymoon to sleep with her boy-band husband, Nick Lachey. And, says Libby Gray Macke, director of the Glenview, Ill.-based Project Reality: "When we bring in somebody like Miss America 2003, and she says, 'Part of the way that I got where I am today is abstaining from sexual activity, drinking, and drugs,' they love it! Teenagers are longing to hear it's OK to be abstinent." Even Princeton, a university that, like many others, has been known to give condoms to incoming freshmen, has the student-founded Anscombe Society, a club that promotes chastity until marriage.

**Teaching the children.** All that said, 1 out of 5 teens has intercourse before age 15, and, says a new study released by the National Center for Health Statistics, more than 50 percent have had oral sex. And, research shows, at least 75 percent of American parents want schools to take a comprehensive approach that covers abstinence along with birth control—including abortion, sexual orientation, how to use condoms, dealing with pressures to have sex, and emotional consequences. "We would not send our children to a book club without having them read the book," says Robinson. "Why would we send them into the world without information about sex? It makes the child so vulnerable."

Those who think the way Robinson does point to the tell-all programs and to Planned Parenthood's and similar websites as proof that knowledge is the power driving the teen birthrate down. The 30 percent drop between 1991 and 2002 is proof of their success, they say. The pro-abstinence movement makes the same claim. Who's right? An Alan Guttmacher Institute analysis of the teen pregnancy rate between 1988 and 1995 showed that 25 percent of the drop was due to delayed onset of intercourse and 75 percent was because more sexually active teens were using long-acting, ultra-effective contraception. A Columbia University study by Peter Bearman showed that it is true that for some young people virginity pledges can be a protective factor. But it also found that 88 percent of middle and high schoolers who pledge to stay virgins until marriage end up having premarital sex anyway. The bad news is that they are less likely to use contraception the first time they have intercourse. As for students who get comprehensive sex education, they do not have sex earlier or more often, but, although they are reported to practice safe sex more frequently, both groups had the same rate of sexually transmitted infections.
Nor did the pledge do much to repaint the bigger picture. "Young people who have taken a virginity pledge do tend to delay the first intercourse but only by a few months," Rodriguez says. "And they engage in other riskier sexual behaviors like anal sex at a higher rate." Says Leslee Unruh, founder and president of the National Abstinence Clearinghouse: "The Bearman study is flawed. They got to the island but never got to the ocean. They never saw the whole picture."

**Taking sides.** The root of the sex ed problem, says Roffman, "is that we keep [talking about] it as if there is a right side and a wrong side. We're all on the same side: the side of supporting kids. If we abdicate our roles as adults, it will be media and peers that educate our kids."

Roffman believes kids need to know. She is in well-regarded company. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association have called for a program that includes abstinence, STDs, and the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

Abstinence-only is "catastrophe from a public-health point of view," says Joshua Sparrow, assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor with T. Berry Brazelton of the bestselling Touchpoints. "Aside from pregnancy, there are so many diseases that are quite preventable—chlamydia and herpes are on the rise. If kids who chose abstinence waver but do not have information on how to protect themselves, that is a recipe for a public-health nightmare that is entirely preventable."

That extends to mental health. Research shows that 97 percent of public high school students say they hear antigay remarks regularly, and 80 percent of gay and lesbian students say they suffer severe social isolation. "The data has consistently found that gay and lesbian and bi teens have at least three times the rate of [teen] suicide and suicide attempts," says Ron Schlittler, deputy executive director at the national office of Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays, adding, "The fact is, kids self-identify as gay or lesbian whether we like it or not." About 9 percent of high school students say they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning. "Gay kids--just as straight kids--are figuring out these new things that are happening in their heads and bodies," he says. "They need information."

"I didn't think homosexuality should be taught as something that is natural or the same as heterosexuality," says Michelle Turner, a Montgomery County, Md., mother of six. Last year, the county adopted a sex ed curriculum that included information about same-gender attraction and a film that demonstrated putting a condom on a cucumber. Turner and others objected so vehemently that they—encouraged by national supporters—formed a group called Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum, took the school board to court, and won. The curriculum was dropped before it was ever taught. Reaching a national consensus on what should be taught seems unlikely.

**What do teens want?** Like their parents, teenagers have different notions of how much is enough. For a comparative few, abstinence-only classes are—or would be—something of a relief. "Had there been an abstinence-only course, I would have taken that," says John Maddrey, 16, a junior at Einstein High School in Kensington, Md. "To be in a class of people who do think like you think—the way you have been brought up by your family—to get that sense that you're not the only person like that would be a more comfortable environment."
Instead, he took a class that emphasized abstinence. Says Maddrey: "Our teacher always went back to, 'Yes there are these other means of birth control,' but she said they are always fallible. We had a speaker who told us the four types of sex--oral, anal, mutual masturbation, and sex--and told us the risks of all of them. Her concluding point was that abstinence was the best way to keep you healthy," he says, adding, "Homosexuality is a bit of a hot topic. We didn't really go into that. Had they gone into abortion, I would not have attended; I would make my own crusade."

While those wanting a comprehensive approach would feel shortchanged, Maddrey feels he could have done with less. "I'm a very intelligent individual," he says. "You can give me a pamphlet, and I can read it. I have already learned about condoms and birth control. The rest I can put together from TV, the Internet, current events, and what I read in the newspaper."

When Taylor Moore, 16, goes to abstinence-only classes in Chicago public schools and other venues, she's a speaker, not a student. "My message is sex is for marriage. They need to stay focused on their education, dreams, and ambitions," she says. "They will be sent a husband or a wife. God has already ordained that special someone. We don't have to go on the market."

Having done 95 speaking engagements so far this year, she is not worried about those who might think her message is too religious for a public school. "I'm not beating you over the head making you become a secondary virgin," says Moore. "They have to understand, abstinence benefits their future. They have the right to say, 'I'm going to throw my life away.' That's on them." Students listen to other students, she says. "Sometimes all they see [around them] is the booty shakin'. Then they see that I look hip but I'm not hootchy. I'm saying you can look good and be abstinent doing it."

But most students want more from their sex ed class than a just-say-no message. "I couldn't fathom only having covered abstinence," says Jeff Vautin, now 21 and a sound engineering major at the University of Michigan. "You don't have to be married to be in love." And he questions the longevity of some pledges. "It's hard to know at 15 where you are going to be. I don't know if that's something they can really maintain for six or 10 years. Better to be honest to your feelings and very conscious of the decisions you make rather than to say, 'I will not be sexually active.'"

Hunter Kincaid figured out that he was gay when he was in high school in Billings, Mont., and so did his peers, who carved "fag" on his locker. Like them, Kincaid took the abstinence-only class. "As a gay student, I thought it was ridiculous," he says. "Abstinence until marriage for people who can't even get married."

Max Mintz, 17, who like Christine Coleman is part of Sex Etc., thinks the sex ed question is a no-brainer. "Teens given a good education can make good choices. If they are denied the education, they can't," says the Metuchen, N.J., teen, who successfully persuaded his school to broaden its sex ed program.

Coleman believes a comprehensive approach is good for everyone, including the ATM teens. "It makes teens think a lot more and decide, 'Here are my options; here are my limits.' I think they should know how to take care of themselves. Everyone is eventually going to have sex." Her ideal sex ed class would
include "a demonstration on how to use a condom; learning about heterosexual and homosexual relationships; different types of birth control; and the three different types of sex (oral, anal, and vaginal)--and you are going to need to know three different ways to protect yourself depending on which kind of sex you choose, including about oral dams and abstinence. You would learn about romantic relationships and about the different things you can do to prevent actual intercourse but still be romantic-like taking a bath together, sleeping in the same bed together and just cuddling, watching a romantic movie, or just being alone and discovering what they believe is romantic without being sexually active."

As for abstinence until marriage? "They should still have the opportunity to go for a test-drive," she says.

One of the few points on which all sides agree is that the best way for kids to learn about sex is from their parents. "Talk about sexuality openly and honestly from the beginning," says Sparrow. "Be the most important, reliable, trustworthy source of guidance for your child--not just giving the mechanics of reproduction but that part of caring about and understanding another human being."

**Workable answers?** The notion that schools could please all the parents all the time by offering both types of sex ed classes is an idea most experts say is not financially feasible--particularly since many parents would want something in between.

Many believe religious organizations should provide part of sex education, and many do, almost always in the context that sex should be saved for marriage. But some have a more comprehensive take, such as the Unitarian Universalist Church's OWL ("Our Whole Lives") program. "It's much, much more," says Pam Luttig, 47, who has two children in OWL. "Sexuality is bigger than sex. Just as important is relationships, intimacy, making decisions." Adds Unitarian minister Debra Haffner of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, "It's not just about sexual behaviors like making love and masturbation. It's about values, friendship, dating, marriage and committed relationship, sexuality, being safe, body anatomy, puberty, sexual language, unintended pregnancy options, defining and redefining abstinence." The first lessons are taught by trained teachers during Sunday school for 5-to-6-year-olds. "It's age-developmentally appropriate," she says. "We say all families are special without talking about a romantic, sexual attraction." In fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, the program introduces issues such as sexual orientation. We talk about values and respect. The next program--offered to seventh, eighth, and ninth graders--is 27 workshops."

The workshops, says Luttig's son Caleb Stoltz, 15, teach kids to think for themselves and about others. "They're not saying, 'You have to be abstinent or else.' They kind of say, 'Save it. It's worthwhile to do it with someone you love.' "

Roffman has come up with a plan that could be called comprehensive-plus. "One of the reasons the Christian right is so mad is that teachers are not allowed to talk about religion in school at all," she says. "That is absurd. Religion is a cornerstone of our society. We should say, 'We have to raise children in the world in which they are living, but we will insist that your religious views are heard.' " She adds, "Present the controversy while still giving the facts. Present it as part of your lesson. Say, 'Masturbation isn't harmful; some people do, some don't, and some religions believe it is a sin.' Better to say there are
a range of beliefs and not pretend that there is only one point of view."

Besides, Roffman notes, the world in which they live is brimming with information. "The same child that gets an abstinence-only education can go on the Internet and see not only the word; they can see sex." And the parents may never know.

Says Coleman: That kid "could be the unknown sexpert of the teenage world."

PHOTO (COLOR): Friends Josh and Jami attend eighth grade in Santa Fe, N.M.

PHOTO (COLOR): Sex Ed Options. Teens teach teens through Sex Etc.

PHOTO (COLOR): Unitarians encourage frank questions and discussion.

PHOTO (COLOR): Virginity Ring. Members of the "Silver Ring Thing" have made a pledge of abstinence until marriage.

PHOTO (COLOR): Father and Son. Mark Linen applauds son Joshua’s pledge of sexual abstinence until marriage.

PHOTO (COLOR): Young Love. Middle schoolers at the bench where they meet most days after class

PHOTO (COLOR)

By Katy Kelly

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