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Fidelity, Mutual Respect Best Shields Against AIDS

by

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This message initially appeared in part, as a letter to the editor of the Fort Belvoir (VA) Eagle, 10 June 1993.

"AIDS has a 100 percent fatality rate . . . I don't want her to ever be at risk." Voicing this deep concern a teenager's parent marched her off to the condom display rack at a nearby store for schooling on condom use and safety ("Parent takes daughter to condom school," *Belvoir Eagle*, May 27). Before school lets out, however, there are a few extra facts to understand about serious problems with these not-so-safe contraceptives.

The sad fact is that condoms have a failure rate of at least 15 to 18 percent for preventing pregnancy among teenagers. This means that about one in every five girls who rely on condoms is likely to end up pregnant. Some studies have shown an even higher failure rate. Of course, when condoms do fail, the failure rate is a 100 percent disaster for those teens and their families.

The editor-in-chief of *Postgraduate Medicine*, Dr. Glen C. Griffin, asks, "When there is an 18 percent failure rate in preventing pregnancy in girls, who are vulnerable a few days a month, what is the failure rate for preventing transmission of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, when boys and girls are vulnerable every day of the month?"

A.C. Green, a basketball star for the L.A. Lakers and courageous advocate of abstinence, warns, "It's a lie to say that putting on a condom makes you as secure as Fort Knox. . . condoms have a hard enough time just stopping a woman from getting pregnant, let alone blocking an HIV virus, which is 450 times smaller than sperm itself. It's like water through a net."

Condom slippage and breakage rates as high as 15 percent have been reported. In fact, an article in *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* concludes that commonly used barrier contraceptives, such as condoms, do not afford adequate protection against sexual spread of an organism named *Chlamydia*.

And a former Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. William R. Archer III, agrees that "condoms over a period of time in a sexual relationship offer no protection against *Chlamydia*. Condom education has been touted as the great cure-all for AIDS and pregnancy among teens. It is not. One out of three sexually active teenagers will acquire a sexually transmitted disease before graduation from high school. And, in most cases, a condom will have done little to stop it."

J.S. McIlhane, Jr., M.D., president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, warns, "The philosophy that directs teens to 'be careful' or to 'play it safe with condoms' has not protected them. It has only enticed them into the quagmire of venereal warts, genital cancer and precancer, herpes, infertility and AIDS."

Dr. Theresa Crenshaw chided the 800 attendees at the national convention of the American Association of Sex Education Counselors and Therapists, "Putting a mere balloon between a healthy body and a deadly disease is NOT safe."

Condom protection depends on the thin hope that teenagers will use condoms reliably. The parents of a teenager might well wonder whether their teens, who may sometimes have trouble remembering to close the door behind them when they are sober, could even remember to use a condom when they are not.

There is growing evidence that sexual activity in children and teens leads them into further dysfunctional and self-destructive behavior. A study published in *Pediatrics*, for example, finds that sexually active teens are six times as likely to have used alcohol and 10 times as likely to have been a passenger in an auto driven by someone on drugs. And they are more likely to have attempted suicide.

Postgraduate Medicine's Griffin asserts, "Kids need to know they shouldn't be having sex when they are kids. And even though it may not be very popular to say these days, I think kids need to know that the only really safe sex is between two faithful marriage partners who are free of sexually transmitted diseases."

Popular advice says, "Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but wear a condom." During an address at Duke University, ABC's Ted Koppel countered with, "No! The answer is 'No!' Not because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward, but, 'No!' because it's wrong!"

What mother, on learning that her teenage daughter might secretly be riding around in high-risk traffic in an auto with bad brakes, would settle for a one-time visit to the bumper sales section of the local auto parts store? Rubber bumpers don't make sense for safe teenage driving; rubber condoms don't make sense for safe teenage sex.

The key is not "safe sex," but "saved sex." Our kids need to learn self-respect and self-control, not sort-of-safe self-indulgence. The problem with condoms is that they fail to address the root problem of teenage promiscuity. Condoms can never solve the problem, and they fail badly in masking it. Condoms — we should have guessed it all along — are nothing but a cover-up.

There is nothing particularly special about copulation — the physical act of sex itself. Alley cats, rodents, reptiles, and even much lower forms regularly engage in the practice. They do not invest a great deal of energy, however, either in thinking it over beforehand or in following up later on. What raises our human

sexuality above that of animals is our insight and our foresight; our ability to understand the deeper nature and wonder of what we are doing and to foresee its long-range consequences and value. Our sexuality then becomes a deep and special mystery, a life-generating act, a unique communication. Far more than a biological urge to be satisfied at whim or a right to be freely demanded, human sexuality is an awesome responsibility, a gift of extraordinary commitment, reserved for one very special partner, a bond of love for life.

In many of our public schools today, they may still be teaching that our children are the hope for our future; but actions speak louder. Teenage-condom propaganda is ultimately a tactic of desperation and despair. It treats the future generation as if they were incapable of self-restraint, or of rising above mere animal instinct. Selling out for a cynical quick-fix approach to damage-control, they risk condemning our youth to a lifetime orientation toward alley-cat sexuality. If we are teaching a 16-year-old that intercourse with multiple 14-year-old sex partners is "responsible sex" (as long as they remember to use a condom), what hope do we have of later instilling the concepts of commitment, self-discipline, fidelity and selflessness?

There is a better way — a far better way, but it is not for sale in the local drugstore. We must teach it daily in our homes, as well as in our schools. And we must teach it, not only by our words, but, far more importantly, by our example. More than a slogan, family values must be an ongoing, living commitment. And rather than concentrating on the negative denial of immediate pleasure gratification, we should be focusing on the very positive advantages, both short-and long-range, that come from building a fulfilling relationship, one that is based on sound values, maturity and self-discipline. To "Just Say 'No!'" is just not enough. Far better, we should teach: Just say "yes" — to self-control, to fidelity, and to mutual respect. The best things in life are worth waiting for. "Yes!"