

# RETHINKING RESPONSIBILITY:

Reflections on Sex and Accountability



THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN  
TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY

# RETHINKING RESPONSIBILITY:

Reflections on Sex and Accountability

This project was supported by many, but became a reality because of the untiring and dedicated work of a few. In particular, deep appreciation is offered to:

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Vivian Berryhill  
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The Essayists

Readers should note that the following essays are presented in alphabetical order according to the author's name. The essays do not necessarily reflect the views of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and are meant to spark conversations about the intersection between personal responsibility and the decisions young people make about sex.

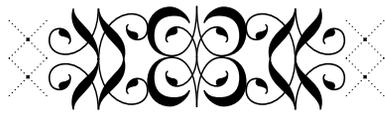


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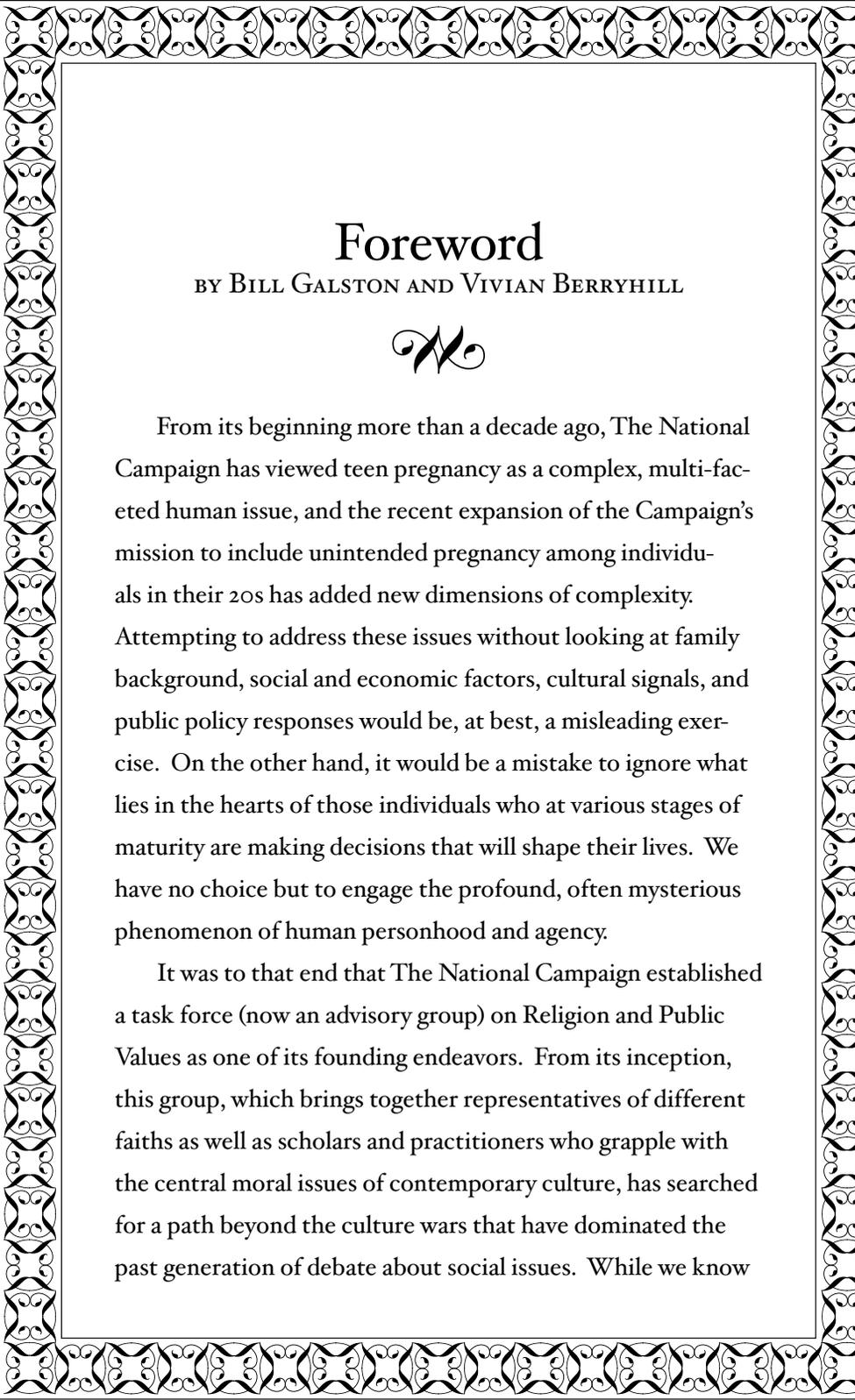
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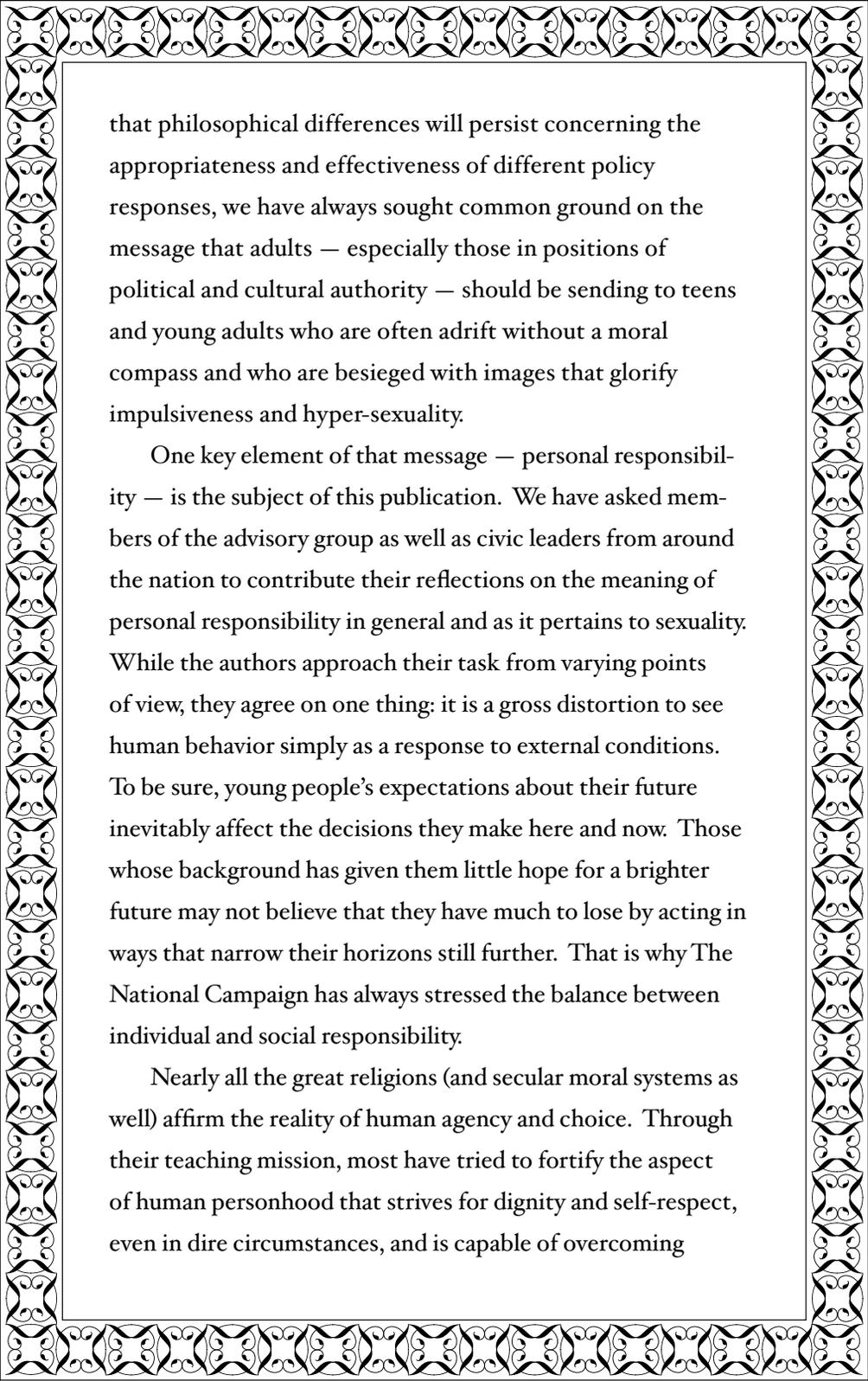
# Foreword

BY BILL GALSTON AND VIVIAN BERRYHILL



From its beginning more than a decade ago, The National Campaign has viewed teen pregnancy as a complex, multi-faceted human issue, and the recent expansion of the Campaign's mission to include unintended pregnancy among individuals in their 20s has added new dimensions of complexity. Attempting to address these issues without looking at family background, social and economic factors, cultural signals, and public policy responses would be, at best, a misleading exercise. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to ignore what lies in the hearts of those individuals who at various stages of maturity are making decisions that will shape their lives. We have no choice but to engage the profound, often mysterious phenomenon of human personhood and agency.

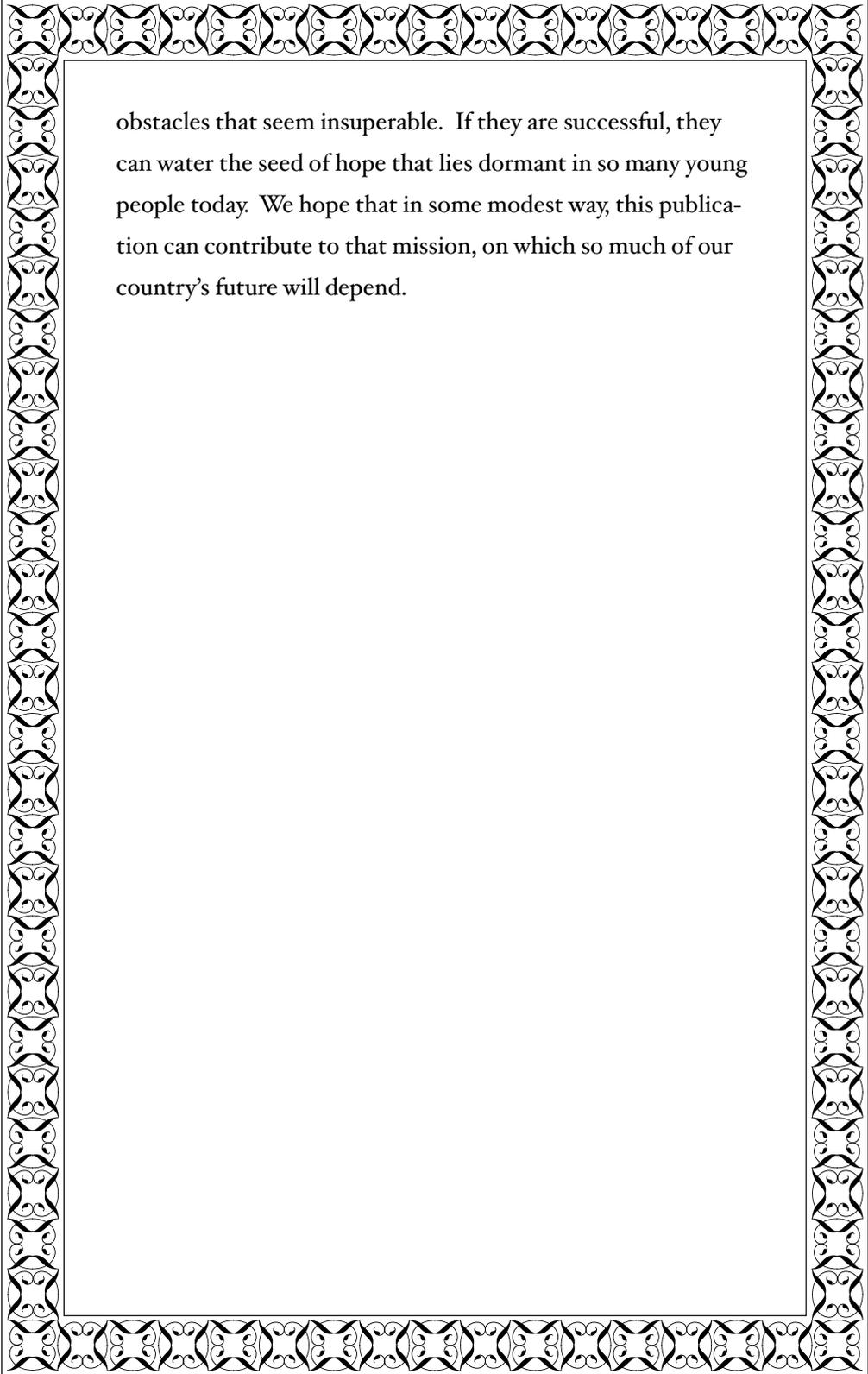
It was to that end that The National Campaign established a task force (now an advisory group) on Religion and Public Values as one of its founding endeavors. From its inception, this group, which brings together representatives of different faiths as well as scholars and practitioners who grapple with the central moral issues of contemporary culture, has searched for a path beyond the culture wars that have dominated the past generation of debate about social issues. While we know



that philosophical differences will persist concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness of different policy responses, we have always sought common ground on the message that adults — especially those in positions of political and cultural authority — should be sending to teens and young adults who are often adrift without a moral compass and who are besieged with images that glorify impulsiveness and hyper-sexuality.

One key element of that message — personal responsibility — is the subject of this publication. We have asked members of the advisory group as well as civic leaders from around the nation to contribute their reflections on the meaning of personal responsibility in general and as it pertains to sexuality. While the authors approach their task from varying points of view, they agree on one thing: it is a gross distortion to see human behavior simply as a response to external conditions. To be sure, young people's expectations about their future inevitably affect the decisions they make here and now. Those whose background has given them little hope for a brighter future may not believe that they have much to lose by acting in ways that narrow their horizons still further. That is why The National Campaign has always stressed the balance between individual and social responsibility.

Nearly all the great religions (and secular moral systems as well) affirm the reality of human agency and choice. Through their teaching mission, most have tried to fortify the aspect of human personhood that strives for dignity and self-respect, even in dire circumstances, and is capable of overcoming



obstacles that seem insuperable. If they are successful, they can water the seed of hope that lies dormant in so many young people today. We hope that in some modest way, this publication can contribute to that mission, on which so much of our country's future will depend.

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# Conflicted Messages

ELAYNE BENNETT

PRESIDENT & FOUNDER, BEST FRIENDS FOUNDATION



For the past several decades, personal freedom resonated as the message of the day and overshadowed any mention of personal responsibility. This cultural shift gave rise to numerous consequences as evidenced by heightened sexual activity at earlier ages, alarming rates of sexually transmitted infection (STI), and large numbers of children raised in single-parent households. What suffered during this period was the notion of personal responsibility and respect for ourselves and others.

In the context of teen pregnancy prevention, what does it mean to be personally responsible? Research shows that children are likely to have the best outcomes when born into a stable, two-parent family.<sup>1</sup> The decision of whether and when to become pregnant should optimally occur in the context of marriage between a husband and wife who will determine how they will plan for their family. Given the bleak statistics — teenage mothers often do not complete school, increasing the probability that they and their children will live in poverty<sup>2</sup> — it is difficult to imagine how our culture would ever condone producing children outside the boundaries of marriage and family and deem it “responsible.” Organizations that promote “comprehensive” sex education would argue that personal responsibility means to use birth control/condoms. In *Emerging Answers*

2007, Doug Kirby reports that 30% of teens ages 15-19 who rely on oral contraception do not take a pill every day, which is necessary for protection.<sup>3</sup> Is it realistic to expect sexually active adolescents to be “personally responsible?”

Most would agree that teens are not ready for pregnancy and parenthood. The point of disagreement lies in whether youth programs should address preventing the pregnancy by dispensing contraception, or preventing the sexual activity which leads to pregnancy. I believe the most responsible approach is to reduce the sexual activity.

Two critical areas which must be addressed are: (1) the influence of media on popular culture and (2) the lack of clear and consistent messages from adult authority figures, i.e. parents, teachers, clergy, etc.

Teens are bombarded with messages from movies, television, and music that glorify sex, violence, and drug and alcohol use. It has been said that next to parents, television is perhaps a child’s most influential teacher. A recent study reported that the average child spends nearly 45 hours per week with media, compared with 17 hours with parents.<sup>4</sup> Primetime programming is heavily weighted with sexual references and innuendoes. Another study found that “verbal references to non-married partners outnumbered scenes depicting or implying sex between married partners by a ratio of nearly four to one.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, nine out of 10 students in a 2007 Best Friends student survey want to be married someday. This indicates that our children still see marriage as a valuable goal. Why, then, is so little attention given to helping them reach that goal? The major media has simply not responded to the viewer’s preference for family shows that depict positive relationships and healthy marriages.

Equally important are the policies of authority figures that significantly influence student's risk behaviors. Some experts recommend that condoms be distributed in high school or even middle school because "kids are going to have sex anyway." Is this a responsible policy? Not so, according to Jim Munn, track coach at the now infamous Gloucester High School, where 17 girls got pregnant last spring. In a letter to the *Gloucester Daily Times* editor he wrote, "Kids drink too. So why not also dispense alcoholic beverages to the students, and give them a 'safe place' to booze it up such as the high school field house..."<sup>6</sup>

Studies indicate the interconnectedness of sexual risk behaviors with other negative outcomes such as drugs and alcohol use.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, adults in positions of authority are behaving responsibly when they clearly and consistently advise adolescents to reject all risky behaviors related to sex, drugs, and alcohol. Should young children be taught how to play safely with matches? The consequences of adolescent premarital sexual activity are no less serious.

The difference in approach lies in one word — expectation. Given the right information and guidance by caring adults, youth are capable of making good decisions. Research confirms that youth respond to the challenge of high expectations by making positive choices and setting goals for their future. The *Adolescent & Family Health* journal (Spring 2005) compared the research study of approximately 200 Best Friends girls to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey of non-participating peers in D.C. Public Schools. This comparison found that Best Friends participants were: (1) two times less likely to use alcohol, (2) eight times less likely to use drugs, (3) more than two times less likely to smoke, and (4) more than six times less likely to have sex.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, teen sexual activity is an issue of character. It is a question of what kind of human being one wants to become. According to character education expert Thomas Lickona, in a culture often hostile to sexual restraint, adolescents must have a sense of ethical and moral competence if they are to exercise sexual self-respect and self discipline.<sup>9</sup> When these components are in place they are more likely to make good decisions and are better prepared for meaningful relationships, which are important factors for a successful life.

After more than 30 years of working with students, I am convinced that young people really want to do the right thing. When character is not taught, children lack the foundation to exercise personal responsibility and are ill-equipped to make decisions that may affect them and others. Our youth deserve an opportunity to develop these skills and have a childhood before they have a child. Unfortunately, sexual activity and drug and alcohol use rob children of this opportunity.

The Best Friends Foundation has risen to the challenge of positive youth development through implementation of our research-based programs which represent the real “comprehensive” approach to adolescent health and character development. Our children’s future is at stake. If we give our children our best, they will surely respond with their best.

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*Elayne Bennett serves as the President and Founder of the Best Friends Foundation. In addition to teaching the Foundation's abstinence curriculum and training educators throughout the country, Mrs. Bennett serves as a spokeswoman on issues of adolescent behavior and development. Mrs. Bennett developed the Best Friends program in 1987, and due to the overwhelming demand for a boys' program, she launched Best Men in 2000. She earned her B.A. and M.Ed. from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.*

# Creating a Responsible Climate

DR. MICHAEL CARRERA

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ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY PREVENTION PROGRAM



Personal responsibility within the context of pregnancy planning and prevention is not a stand alone, separate concept or set of behaviors centering on sexual expression and a reproductive health choice. Responsible sexual and reproductive behavior is informed by our overall core values as they apply to all dimensions of our life. As such, personal responsibility as a driver in life is vitally conditioned by spiritual, cultural, intellectual, and emotional dimensions as well as the biological. Accordingly, while pregnancy planning and prevention are important ways of expressing responsible sexuality, this behavior represents only one aspect of a much wider human expression.

The development of a personal sense of responsibility is informed and influenced by numerous factors. Family, in particular a parent or other present, caring adult, significantly helps individuals develop responsible, equitable, caring values. These values underlie choices and decision-making of all kinds throughout early development, the teen years, and on to adulthood.

Specifically, family influences foster the healthy development of self esteem in females and males.<sup>1</sup> When a young person feels valued and prized as a person and family member, and experiences emotional safety, those feelings increase their belief that their destiny is in their own hands, and that life and relationships are not simply

a series of things that just happen: it helps them understand that certain behaviors result in certain outcomes; that there are causes and effects over which they have control; and that not hurting themselves or others is a personal responsibility that contributes to the common good of family and society.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, in the realm of making choices that are not risky and conveying respect, responsibility, and equity in relationships, appropriate self esteem development looms as essential in the hierarchy of a young person's thoughts and behavior.

Parents and family members have no choice about their influence in helping develop the self esteem of their children and family members — their only choice is whether they do it well or poorly.

In summary, a fundamental understanding for all of us, parents, educators, and policy makers is that we do not prevent unplanned pregnancies, risky, or irresponsible sexual behavior — young people do. What we do is create a climate, an atmosphere in our homes, communities, and in our country where young men and women believe that a joyful, gratifying life is ahead of them, and they possess the capacity to achieve fulfillment. This understanding by young men and women increases the odds that personal responsibility within the context of pregnancy planning and prevention is more likely to be realized.

#### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Classroom Management Resources Site, California State University, EDE1 414 EDSE 415 March, 2009

*Dr. Michael A. Carrera is Director of The Children's Aid Society Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program. For 25 years this program has served thousands of young people in New York City and other geographies around the country. The Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program is a term evidence-based program serving adolescent boys and girls.*

# Variable World of Personal Responsibility

REV. TOM DAVIS

CHAIR, PLANNED PARENTHOOD CLERGY ADVISORY BOARD



With the possible exception of parents, no group issues more exhortations to personal responsibility than we clergy. An estimate of the effectiveness of those appeals was given by the social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. While he loved to preach, he did not think that people are changed by sermons. He believed that we are more influenced by the moral atmosphere of the society around us.

When considering the issue of personal responsibility, it seems wise to recognize that much depends on the moral and social matrix in which each individual tries to live. For example, if young people are raised in families that are basically functional and caring, go on to higher education, have financial resources backing them, and have a real future, then it is reasonable to expect them to take a great deal of personal responsibility. If they do not wish to have children before they are further along in their careers, they should be responsible by using birth control. If, however, other young men and women have few if any of these supports, are living lives with few opportunities and little hope, then it is understandable, if sad, that they may not care enough about themselves to exercise similar care. In such a situation, demanding personal responsibility without the provision of social supports may not be realistic. Even

though such personal responsibility would be in their own self-interest, young men and women may have simply given up on themselves. These are the young people to whom life just “happens.”

With this in mind, it seems clear that social policies can make personal situations such as unintended pregnancies either better or worse. Things might be somewhat improved if federal and state governments spent more money on programs to make contraception more affordable and available. While that and similar measures could be helpful, they are only a part of what is needed. Research done by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and other groups has shown that the mere act of giving people contraception does not automatically solve the problem. What matters more than that is that they have realistic prospects for their life and career. When those are present, people are far more likely to take responsibility and avoid unintended pregnancies.

Providing such “realistic prospects” is a tall order for any complex society, but these kinds of programs have been successful before. The GI Bill of Rights put millions of World War II veterans through college at a time when many, if not most, of them would never have gone to college. Personal responsibility alone could not have put those men and women in college.

The more our society is able to break the cycle of poor schools, weakened families, and limited prospects, the more it will strengthen their sense of personal responsibility and reduce unintended pregnancy.

*The Rev. Tom Davis is currently the chair of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America Clergy Advisory Board. He is a minister in the United Church of Christ. A native of Scranton, PA, he is a graduate of Dartmouth College and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He received his Ph.D. from Duke University. He is the author of Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances, Rutgers Press, 2005.*

# Personal Responsibility: A Choice

CASSANDRA L. DEBENEDETTO

FOUNDER, ANSCOMBE SOCIETY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY



Having recently graduated from Princeton University and now working with college undergraduates across the country on matters of sex and relationships, I am more than familiar with the messages of “sexual responsibility” being taught at today’s universities. Here, “sexual responsibility” is understood to consist of two things. First, it means using contraception to prevent pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Second, it means receiving consent from the other person before engaging in sexual activity. Many students accept these teachings and direct their own behaviors according to them. Whether they are sexually active with a committed significant other or they are sexually active with multiple un-committed partners, as long as they use contraception and receive consent they believe they are being responsible. However, there is also a growing population of college students who regard this message of “sexual responsibility” as overly-simplistic, misleading, and even harmful. They believe today’s universities (and, indeed, much of the broader culture) are settling for a type of “damage control” in matters of sexuality. This is actually a severe disservice to young men and women because it assumes they cannot exercise responsibility — with respect to the

cause of the “damage” — in their sexual choices and behaviors.

The truth is, to prevent pregnancy, reduce the spread of STIs, and prevent sexual assault, we need to encourage a type of personal responsibility that extends deeper than current messages to use contraception and gain consent. It is common knowledge that condoms and the Pill are not a guarantee against pregnancy, with roughly 20% of women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy within the first year of condom use.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, condoms only limit the spread of some STIs, leaving young men and women (especially women) vulnerable to diseases that can severely cripple their health and their ability to give birth to healthy children in the future.<sup>2</sup> Not to mention that some women have serious reservations about using the Pill when research has linked its use to immune system suppression,<sup>3</sup> as well as an increased chance of cancer, tumors, heart attacks, and infertility.<sup>4</sup> Even students who are not personally opposed to contraception still believe that encouraging its use within a “safe sex” or “sexual responsibility” program gives a false impression of safety, protection, and responsibility. For them, personal responsibility in matters of sexuality includes not only guarding against unfavorable consequences, but even more so being responsible with the very decisions and behavior that lead to those consequences in the first place.

Many young men and women today desire encouragement, resources, and support to be personally responsible sexually by choosing abstinence. For them, personal responsibility in matters of sexuality means understanding the long-term consequences of one’s choices and behavior, both for oneself and for others, including one’s future spouse and children. Although marriage and family may not be on the minds of most teenagers and college students, there is no reason why it shouldn’t be when getting married and having

children is a reality for the vast majority of people. Young people must understand that children do best when raised within a stable, intact family (i.e. when raised by a biological mother and father who are committed to each other in marriage).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they must understand that the best preparation for achieving a stable marriage is limiting one's sexual partners to one person, that person being one's spouse.<sup>6</sup> This means that for young men and women, personal responsibility means setting a goal of preparing for a healthy and stable marriage and family, and staying committed to that goal through abstinence.

In this light we can easily see that choosing abstinence is not a decision made out of fear of contracting STIs or conceiving a child. Instead, choosing abstinence means embracing a lifestyle committed not only to one's own immediate well-being, but to the well-being of one's future family.

In matters of sex, we cannot settle for a type of responsibility that merely attempts to cover up irresponsible decisions. Rather, we must commit ourselves to a vision of love and sexuality that fosters greater hope for the future.

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5. When compared to other family structures, children and adolescents living in intact families (married-biological-parent families) tend to report lower levels of psychological distress, lower levels of behavioral problems, and

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6. See "The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts" by Robert E. Rector, et al. Available: [http://www.heritage.org/research/abstinence/abstinence\\_charts.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/abstinence/abstinence_charts.cfm)

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# Indivisible

E.J. DIONNE

COLUMNIST, THE WASHINGTON POST



Too often, our political debates cast personal and social responsibility as ideas in opposition to each other. Those who emphasize social responsibility and highlight the structural and economic causes of social problems are seen as ignoring the responsibilities of individuals for their own fate. Those who emphasize personal responsibility and highlight the ways in which individual decisions lie behind high rates of crime, teen pregnancy, and family breakup are seen as indifferent to social justice and the obligations of the community toward its least privileged members.

It's true, of course, that advocates of social responsibility sometimes understate the responsibilities of individuals, and those who stress personal responsibility are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge the high costs of racial discrimination and economic inequalities. But if ever there was a false choice, this is it. Of course we are responsible for ourselves and for our own decisions. All of us are called upon to be responsible in our own lives. But surely social responsibility is a component of individual responsibility. We are responsible for ourselves, but also for our families and those we love, for our communities and, ultimately, for our country, and our world. To pick a classic example: family breakup is often a cause of poverty. But poverty is often a cause for family breakup. High crime rates

are caused by the acts of irresponsible individuals. But high crime rates are associated with poverty. To put matters simply: Poverty causes crime, and crime causes poverty.

The great social scientist James Q. Wilson spoke a powerful conservative truth when he declared: “In the long run, the public interest depends on private virtue.” But there is a comparable liberal truth: that private virtue can be nurtured by wise public policy and thoughtful public action. David Shipler put it well in his 2004 book, *The Working Poor* when he called for a war on poverty that “recognizes both the society’s obligation through government and business, and the individual’s obligation through labor and family.”

In the struggle against teen and unplanned pregnancy, real progress came when we put aside culture-war arguments. This issue, more than almost any other, reminds us that a great social need — the care and well-being of children — is best met when individuals behave responsibly. But the success achieved in lowering teen pregnancy rates in the 1990s especially depended powerfully on social factors ranging from new public policies to rising prosperity that afforded new opportunities to young women.

Liberals tend to speak out against one set of sins: materialism, prejudice, racism, sexism, a lack of individual and social generosity. Conservatives tend to speak out against a different set of sins: personal irresponsibility, hedonism, a lack of regard for the importance of family life and the responsibilities of parenthood. We would do well to end this fruitless argument over which sins are worse. We should try to discover the virtues that help us overcome both sets of human frailties by remembering that individual responsibility and the common good are indivisible.

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# A New Sexual Ethic

REV. DEBRA W. HAFFNER  
CO-FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE



Parents and religious leaders have a responsibility to help adolescents and young adults achieve moral, spiritual, and sexual health. Many religious traditions have promoted a sexual ethic that has been summarized as “chastity in singleness, fidelity in marriage.” There is a dramatic need for a new sexual ethic to guide people’s lives, one that does not focus on the morality of specific sexual acts but rather the quality of people’s relationships.

Premarital chastity is an ethic based in ancient biology and social morés. At the time that the Bible was written, people were married shortly after they reached puberty and died soon after their own children reached adulthood. The average life expectancy for women was only 25; many died in childbirth. Even at the turn of the 20th century, the goal of premarital chastity was reasonable: the average age of puberty was 17; the average age of marriage followed closely at 18. A year of “sexual unemployment” was not difficult to achieve.

Today, in stark contrast, young people reach puberty at an average age of 12 to 14; the average age of marriage is 25 to 27. Religious objections and a billion dollar federal abstinence only until marriage program notwithstanding, biology today has trumped convention. For at least the past forty years, nearly 90% of people have first

intercourse before their wedding night.

People are hungry for a new perspective on sexual morality, and it is time to offer moral advice beyond premarital chastity to adolescents and single adults. Many people of faith are seeking to understand how they can act morally and still embrace their sexuality. They want to be good and they want to be sexual. As a single man in his late twenties said to me, “I’ve been taught I can either embrace my sexuality or my religion. Not both. Can you help me?” A newly married 23-year-old Southern Baptist asked me, “Reverend Debra, my whole life I was taught that sex was a sin. Now I’m married, I’m supposed to forget all that and just enjoy myself. It’s killing me not to be able to do that with my husband.”

A new ethic for adolescent and young adult sexuality is urgently needed to replace premarital chastity as a single standard. Adults have a responsibility to help adolescents understand their evolving sexuality and to help them make responsible and healthy sexual choices, now and in their future.

More than fifteen years ago, I developed a framework for a moral sexual relationship. I believe, based on my more than thirty years as a sexuality educator and now as a minister, that a moral, ethical sexual relationship — whether one is married or single, 16 or 35 or 80, gay, bisexual, or straight — is defined by five criteria: it is consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected, if any type of intercourse occurs. I teach adolescents and young adults to remember the five criteria by thinking the word CUHMP or by a mnemonic of the first letter of the five criteria, “Can U Have My Pleasure?” We go on to talk about that the five criteria need three conditions: communication between the partners, adequate time for the relationship to develop, and shared values. These

criteria are more ethically rigorous than abstinence until marriage because they apply to intimate relationships both before as well as after marriage.

Most parents, public health professionals, and religious leaders agree that most adolescents, especially those in high school or younger, are not ready for mature sexual relationships that include intercourse of any kind. The wisdom of religious traditions confirms that a moral sexuality demands self-understanding, respect, and self-discipline. Through education, counseling, support, and many hours of discussion, adults can help adolescents discern their emotional, physical, and spiritual readiness for mature intimate relationships.

But, it is past time for society to recognize most adolescents will become involved in sexual relationships during their teenage years. We must offer education, support, and services to those who are heterosexual and those who are sexual minorities; those who are abstinent and those who have sexual relationships; and those who have experienced abuse and exploitation. Rather than viewing adolescent and single young adult sexuality as needing adult controls, we must help them develop their own capacity for moral sexual decision-making, provide them with accurate information about sexuality, and model positive, healthy, and joyful attitudes about human sexuality in our own relationships.

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# The Sequence of Personal Responsibility

RON HASKINS

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Personal responsibility is the willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards. But personal responsibility also means that when individuals fail to meet expected standards, they do not look around for some factor outside themselves to blame. The demise of personal responsibility occurs when individuals blame their family, their peers, their economic circumstances, or their society for their own failure to meet standards. The three areas of personal decision-making in which the nation's youth and young adults most need to learn and practice personal responsibility are education, sexual behavior and marriage, and work.

In the last two decades, the idea that public policy should emphasize the importance of personal responsibility has become popular among both Republicans and Democrats. Not long ago, many critics held that the nation's social policy expected too little of those it was designed to assist. Basing policy on the expectation of personal responsibility means that government must spend money

to help people, to be sure, but government programs must also expect that individuals will make wise decisions and then make every effort to implement their decisions. More than a decade ago, Larry Mead of New York University called this movement the “new paternalism.” By this label he meant that government would organize programs to send a clear, value-based message of expected behavior and then arrange consequences for those who ignore the message. An important and somewhat controversial aspect of paternalism is that government decides, based on an appeal to traditional or widely accepted values, what good choices are and then ensures that people are rewarded for the right choice or punished for the wrong choice, all the while emphasizing that individuals are responsible for their own behavior.

When applied to education, personal responsibility means that students accept the responsibility to study hard and to learn as much as they can in courses that press against the limits of their capacity. For most students, this aspect of personal responsibility means that they must take courses that prepare them for college. Hard work is a must because the single most accurate predictor of college performance is high school grade point average, probably because grades reflect both capacity and hard work. Students who choose not to prepare for college must prepare for the world of work, a goal that also requires strenuous personal effort. Students who do not go to college should enroll in training courses after high school. Without job training, an apprenticeship, or a two-year or four-year degree, most young people are destined to a life of marginal employment and income.

When applied to sex and marriage, personal responsibility means that young people should avoid sex until at least high school graduation or entry to college. Many adults argue that young people

should wait even longer. Parents, teachers, ministers, and other authority figures should send an unambiguous message that the best choice for all adolescents is to just say no. When young people do initiate sex at whatever age that might be, personal responsibility means taking all necessary measures to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Both research and centuries of human experience show that single parenthood is difficult for both parents and children alike. Nonmarital births, which are almost always caused by a lack of commitment to moral norms or by inability to act responsibly in light of those norms, bring a new dimension to personal responsibility because the future of three people are implicated, one of whom has no voice. Regardless of the decisions young people make about age of sexual debut, personal responsibility and the needs of society require that pregnancy and child birth occur within the context of a loving marriage.

At the crescendo of his astonishing inaugural address, President Obama called the nation's attention to "a new era of responsibility." What did he mean? At minimum, he meant that young Americans should be guided by a clear and straightforward set of goals: finish your education, get a job, get married, and only then have children — and get the sequence right. After that, everything is possible.

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# A Simple Definition?

KAY S. HYMOWITZ

WILLIAM E. SIMON FELLOW, THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE



In the political world, personal responsibility has been short-hand. It refers, in a general way, to self-sufficiency. The official name of the welfare reform bill, where the phrase has figured most prominently, was The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. The name was a response to one of the chief criticisms of welfare: that it promoted dependency on government, or to put it a little differently, on tax-paying fellow citizens. This dependency was precisely the opposite of what the Founders had in mind. They not only wanted self-government, in the sense of political independence; they wanted citizens who were capable of self-governing. The idea behind welfare reform was to change what critics felt to be incentives that led people to become dependent on government payments — thereby shifting responsibility for themselves to others — and to promote, instead, work which would lead to individual self-sufficiency. People who had formerly been dependents would become responsible for supporting themselves, i.e. personally responsible.

In more informal conversation, personal responsibility has slightly different connotations. It refers to taking blame for your mistakes. But there is a big assumption behind this meaning of personal responsibility as it relates to the first meaning. When someone accepts responsibility for a misstep, that person also

understands him or herself to be either in charge of their own life or capable of taking charge in the future. This also hints at self-awareness; that is, understanding one's personal actions and their consequences. It suggests mindfulness; thinking through our actions rather than simply behaving impulsively or emotionally.

These are qualities that don't come naturally to human beings; this is why children can't be independent, because they are not yet fully responsible. It takes time and training to learn to be self-aware, mindful, and self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency depends on a degree of experience in making decisions and in facing their consequences. Hence, the American tradition of a long period of childhood during which children make their own decisions first on small matters — what clothes to wear on a certain day — and then on larger matters — what courses to take in school until they have learned to be completely self-sufficient.

The two meanings of personal responsibility suggest some strengths and weaknesses in using the idea as a framework for attacking the problem of unplanned pregnancy. On the one hand, insofar as personal responsibility implies self-awareness and mindfulness, it is a useful way of talking. In particular, it helps explain why teenagers should not have children for the reasons I discussed in my previous paragraph. It could even be a way of highlighting the importance of deliberativeness for grown women — and men — in their twenties.

But personal responsibility poses some problems as a way of understanding teen or unplanned pregnancy. According to *Time*, the teenagers who got pregnant in Gloucester thought they were being responsible and mature because they were having their children; perhaps they had made a mistake — getting pregnant before they should have — but they were now going to “step up.” The

consequences of welfare reform also provide a cautionary tale. Women who had formerly depended on government welfare did take more personal responsibility. They got jobs. They stopped going to welfare offices. Many of them moved out of poverty. But despite the hopes of the architects of the 1996 bill, they continued to have unplanned pregnancies, that is, to have babies in their twenties outside committed, long-term relationships with their children's fathers. According to the principle of personal responsibility, then, the Gloucester girls and single, low income mothers who are no longer on welfare are a complete success. I would guess that few Americans would agree.

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# Responsibility to Self and Service

MARIE C. JOHNS

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The dichotomy of our current time was most aptly described nearly 150 years ago in the unforgettable opening lines of Charles Dickens' great work, *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." Dickens' beautiful, yet painful rendition of his time rings very true for us now; and yet, we also are in a time that is replete with opportunities for resurrection and renewal.

I am still absorbing the power and positive energy that emanated from President Obama's inauguration. Through that process, I have thought many times about what my role should be in supporting the need for change that he preached throughout his campaign. The answer to that question really is simple...I must take responsibility for my actions and give of myself to the larger community, for I believe that the combination of personal responsibility and collective action for the greater good always have been, and will continue to be, the cornerstones for moving our society forward.

Personal responsibility is being accountable for those areas of our lives over which we have control; e.g. developing our minds, managing our financial resources wisely, and respecting our bodies by making smart choices about food and exercise, to name a few. Personal responsibility also means being accountable for our sexual selves and not engaging in risky behavior or creating opportunities for unplanned pregnancies.

Personal responsibility is an important means to an even more critical end. As an African-American woman, I am compelled to live my life in an accountable and responsible way so that I am available to commit myself to the larger community. During these times of unprecedented challenge, we all must view ourselves as the agents who will change the beloved community for the better. In doing so, whatever worst times we may encounter will be met with strength, hope and the capacity to find opportunity in the face of incredible odds.

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# It Takes a Village

TOM JOYNER

HOST, THE TOM JOYNER MORNING SHOW



When I was first asked to write an essay about preventing teen pregnancy, I thought they had come to the wrong person. First off, if you had known me back when I was in school, you would realize the word “essay” would send chills down my spine. Also, I’ve got no teenagers and the ones I did have were boys. But I agreed to write this essay for two reasons: (1) This essay will not be graded, and (2) I’ve read the statistics about teenage pregnancy and remembered that even though it’s the teenage young lady who gets pregnant and has the baby, it’s the teenage young man who gets her there and it’s the responsibility of the boy, the girl, their parents, their church members, their teachers, and everyone else who cares about them to help prevent that from happening. Like the African proverb, “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” it also “Takes a Village to Help Teens Prevent Unplanned Pregnancy.”

But before we discuss finding a solution to this problem, let’s discuss why it’s a problem in the first place. The most obvious to me is that if teenagers are getting pregnant they’re having unprotected sex — and with HIV/AIDS virus reaching record proportions in the African-American community — that’s a major concern. If our teenagers are not getting the message that having unprotected sex can lead, not just to pregnancy, but to diseases and possibly death, you would think would be enough — but it isn’t.

There's nothing more precious than a baby, and who's to say that a child born to unwed teenage parents won't grow up to do something great? But all we need to do is look at some of the statistics, or better yet, look in your school, your church, your community, and maybe your own home, and you can figure that in most cases the struggle is greater for teen moms and dads, and their children are then more likely to grow up in single-parent homes themselves. This is not a put-down of single moms or single dads, who have beaten the odds, raised wonderful families, and are doing their thing. But those who aren't as fortunate live in poverty and are more likely to get involved in gang activity and be victims of domestic abuse and other acts of violence. These are just the facts.

So, if you are a teen or have influence over one, abstinence is the first order of business...but based on what kids are exposed to on TV and the internet...heck...on the school yard...good luck with that! Another way to go is to catch the kids before they're even considering sexual activity and get them involved in positive programs that keep their minds and bodies occupied.

Start talking to your kids early about not just what they want to be when they become adults, but who they want to be. What does their future look like to them right now?

I'd be willing to bet that becoming a single parent isn't in their game plan. But they're children and teens and they need the guidance of responsible parents and other adults to help them stay focused on their dreams and to remind them that certain behaviors, like unprotected sex, are the surest way to send them down a different path. You can only do that, adults, if you're vigilant, sober, and present. Yes, I'm calling out. A lot of parents find themselves becoming unplanned grandparents because they are too busy living

their lives to make the sacrifices that aid in preventing teenage pregnancy. If you're attending parent-teacher conferences, showing up at their events, cheering them on, meeting their friends, chaperoning them on dates, and being the kinds of parents that your kids enjoy being around, your child will be more likely to make the right choices in life. Statistics show that girls and boys who have both parents in their lives tend to fare better than those from single-parent homes. Girls with good relationships with their fathers or other males they're related to — not their mom's boyfriends — have higher self-esteem and girls with high self-esteem have lower instances of teen pregnancy.

In a perfect world, there would be a perfect formula we could follow that would guarantee that if we did everything right none of our children or grandchildren would have an unplanned pregnancy. Unfortunately, no such formula exists. All we can do is do our best to teach our kids the most moral and safest ways to prevent having babies before they're ready physically, mentally, and financially.

As a parent, the one thing I know I did right was invest early in the education of my boys and let them know early and often that I expected and required them to graduate from high school and the Historically Black College or University of their choice. We talked about their future, and by the time they were teenagers both my boys had pictures in their heads of themselves attending college. It's never too early to begin taking your children on college tours, putting them on mailing lists to receive information about colleges, and giving them a mental imprint of how good their lives can be down the line.

Every year the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* celebrates "Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day," and so I've got making healthy living choices on my mind. Planned pregnancies lead to healthier

babies, healthier children, healthier financial pictures, and healthier futures. The alternative is much gloomier and it takes a village to prevent it from happening.

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# A Belief System

REV. STERLING LANDS  
SENIOR PASTOR, GREATER CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH



I have often wondered why it is that so many individuals pay so little attention to developing a character-centered belief system. I realize that we live in a society that primarily focuses on looking and feeling good without much consideration for character. This “group-think modality” is seeded, nurtured, and maintained through the various media portals we consume. It’s not that we consciously choose to not develop a character-centered belief system, but that we are devoid of experiential character principles and practices in our daily involvements. We are drowning in an ever-increasing flood of debt, where we have purchased things that we didn’t need with money that we didn’t have to address needs that were not and are not real. Of course, this all sounds like I am attempting to build a case to blame society for our current life dilemmas; that is not the case at all.

We are responsible for the choices that we make. Every choice carries with it at least one consequence. Personal responsibility is when we admit that we are the ones responsible for our choices. We are responsible for the way we choose to think and to feel. While we might not be responsible for all that happens to us, we are responsible for how we respond and how we react.

How we react and respond to life circumstances and life challenges reflects, to a large degree, our belief system. How we behave tells us almost everything about what we believe. Our belief system

is developed in the societal and cultural incubator that we grow up in, and it is colored by the active and passive pressures exerted upon us by individuals that we hold in high regard. Our belief system is the container that holds our character. Our character, ultimately, determines our choices and conduct. Our character directly influences how we react and respond to life circumstances, life challenges, and societal pressures.

Today, our society promotes sex as the antidote to whatever troubles us. Sex is used to sell virtually anything and everything. Sex is presented as the thing that we most need and want as long as we live on planet earth. The promotion of sex includes the freedom and the right of everyone to indulge until their heart is content. The choice to engage in male-female sex earlier and earlier is accompanied by dire consequences. Babies making babies, high abortion rates, single parent houses, unprepared parents, and increasing crisis pregnancies are just some of the consequences of the sex promotion.

If we want improved results, we must invest in improved belief systems. Telling youth and young adults to say no to premarital or extra-marital sex to reduce unplanned pregnancies will not get the job done. There is no safe sex outside of a renewed belief system. We must no longer conform to the current programming. We must renew our belief system and develop character-centered parents. Personal responsibility is not conceivable without a belief system anchored in high moral character. If we want better behavior we must have better beliefs.

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# Too Much, Too Soon

CAROL PLATT LIEBAU

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When it comes to America’s national conversation about young people and sex, the one principle that almost everyone purports to agree upon is the importance of “personal responsibility.” No doubt, personal responsibility is an indispensable element of healthy teen sexual decision-making (or any other behavior, for that matter). Paradoxically, however, effectively promoting personal responsibility requires a collective commitment to fostering a society that supports it.

To a large degree, sexual morés — positive or not — are shaped and transmitted through the culture. And there, too often, young people (girls, in particular) are being taught that being “hot” or “sexy” is the most important attribute that they can possess — more important than character, intelligence, or talent. Whether it’s the *Gossip Girls* books, Tila Tequila on television, or the recording artists who reference sex in the most degrading terms, young people are bombarded with the message that random and uncommitted sex isn’t just normal and acceptable — it’s almost expected.

When young people receive, accept, and act on that message, the results too often are tragic. It’s almost impossible to quantify the social, human, and economic price that young people, their children, and America as a whole pay when the cycle of young (and/or unwanted), unmarried parenthood continues. But it’s a steep one, as those across the political spectrum acknowledge.

Arguably, a teen's responsibility to his or her fellow citizens can be discharged simply through educated and consistent use of birth control and protection, thereby eliminating the potential costs of funding social services for children on public aid, health services to treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the justice system to enforce parental obligations on the part of either or both parents. But a real understanding of the concept of "personal responsibility" also includes the responsibility that young people bear for themselves, as individuals, to make decisions that will allow them to flourish — physically, emotionally, and economically.

Research published in the *Journal of Adolescence* and by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has found that up to 80% of teen mothers are in financial circumstances so dire that they receive public aid. As of 2004, almost half of the nineteen million new cases of incurable STIs were erupting among adolescents ages 15 to 24. But even if teens could have sex without risking pregnancy or disease, many of them (especially girls) nevertheless suffer long-lasting emotional or psychological repercussions from sexual relationships. Experts have documented teens experiencing regret, anxiety, shame, disappointment, heartbreak, worry, damaged self-esteem, and impaired subsequent relationships as a result of giving too much, too soon.

That's why young people need to hear that sexual self-restraint can be more than a negative choice. They should at least be exposed to the message that it can be a positive decision reflecting respect for themselves, their bodies, and their future spouses (and, for those who are people of faith, for the God who created them). Although such a message most certainly requires a vision of what it means to live a happy, fulfilled, and truly good life, sexual self-restraint isn't

inextricably linked to religious doctrine, contrary to the claims of those hostile to the concept. Nor is sexual self-restraint, contrary to the way that abstinent young people are often portrayed in the news and entertainment media, freaky, deviant, or weird.

Even so, any effort to promote a broad understanding of “personal responsibility” will inevitably conflict with a culture that incessantly instructs the young, “If it feels good, do it.” And for that reason, generally society will have to offer young people something both deeper and more transcendent than dire warnings about lost earnings, fretful babies, and disease. It will have to equip young people with a meaningful understanding of what they’re waiting for; cultivate the attributes (like fortitude, modesty, and courage) that enable young people to live out a commitment to acting responsibly toward themselves and others; and foster social structures (whether at home, school, or church) that reinforce that determination.

His or her own parents, of course, are any young person’s first, best, and most important teachers. But in a society that claims to be dedicated to the well-being of every young person — and where the impact of poor sexual decision-making is widely felt — doesn’t it also make sense to aspire to a culture that supports a broad understanding of personal responsibility when it comes to sex? Or, at the very least, change our culture to one that doesn’t seem committed to actively working against personal responsibility?

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# A Double Standard

AMBER A. MADISON

AUTHOR



If a girl gets the HPV vaccine, she might have sex. If a girl has too much sex, she is a slut. If a girl has unprotected sex, she could get knocked up. If a girl likes sex, she could turn into a nympho.

The way we handle sex and sexuality, you would think young women were doing it with themselves. Lectures about making wise sexual decisions focus stern eyes on young women and give but a darting glance to young men: “dude, where’s your condom?” But you can’t address sexual responsibility without also examining young men’s sexual choices, and all too often that’s left out of the equation.

We all read the story about the girl giving oral sex to multiple guys on the back of a bus — and the articles were all framed the same: what is wrong with young women’s sexuality? No one thought to ask, what is wrong with young men’s sexuality? Why did so many guys think it was okay to receive oral sex in the back of a school bus from a girl who had just gone down on five of his friends? But what if the story was reversed? Say there was a young man who was giving oral sex to multiple girls on the back of a bus. I’d be willing to bet that our concern would still be with the girl’s behavior, and not the boy’s. The articles would be: why are girls receiving oral sex in such a casual environment? Do they not worry about getting an STI from a guy who’s gotten busy with half the

cheerleading squad? We may not condone the irresponsible sex acts of guys, but we do accept them.

The other thing we accept is that guys will treat girls badly. We prepare women for this inevitability by warning them that guys are out for only one thing. We say men are jerks who can't stand commitment and don't value emotional intimacy (even though, ironically, studies have indicated that husbands are more happily married than their wives, and it's more difficult for men to heal emotionally after a break-up). We tell girls that young men are careless beings who engage in sex and feel nothing. And instead of deterring sexual activity, these stereotypes do two things: first, it lets guys off the hook. These ideas make clear that we have no expectation for men to be emotionally or physically responsible in regards to sex. Second, they inadvertently encourage young women to act just as sexually irresponsible as we perceive young men do. In a world where girls can do anything guys can, why would a girl want to be the one taking sex seriously and getting screwed over when she could instead see sex as something emotionally void and "no big deal."

If we want young people to take responsibility for their sexual choices and reproductive health, we must demand the same of men that we demand of women. Teach young men that they are expected to be caring partners who are informed about contraception and that they are expected to think carefully about with whom and when they have sex. Teach young women to expect more out of a guy than just a sex-seeking robot. That way, when young women are making sexual choices, they'll know the way to a man's heart isn't only through his fly. Because sex is something men and women do together, we need to be taught the same information, share the same responsibility of

preventing unwanted pregnancies and STIs, and be held to the same moral standards.

*Amber Madison is the author of [Hooking Up: A Girl's All-Out Guide to Sex and Sexuality](#), the host of the Internet web channel [The Talk](#) ([www.ambermadison.tv](http://www.ambermadison.tv)), and currently tours college campuses talking to students about sex and relationships. She is a recent graduate of Tufts University where she studied human sexuality through a double major in Community Health and American Studies. She has appeared on [The Today Show](#), NPR, various local TV and radio shows, and is frequently quoted in magazines.*

# Who Is Responsible?

KARLO BARRIOS MARCELO

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE FOR THE CENTER FOR INFORMATION  
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In the context of an action, the similarity between personal and governmental responsibility is that both imply a universal good of sorts. The difference on a practical level is measured on which actions the government has lawful and reasonable justification to intervene.

Government influences and validates individuals' choices through the restriction and protection of certain actions with varying degrees of intervention, a path determined by self-interest. Generally, the more personal a responsibility is perceived to be, the less government intervention is tolerated by society. All other actions not checked by the government in this way live in the realm of personal responsibility, which the government can and sometimes must influence. Whether personal or governmental, the value society places upon any responsibility is a reflection of society's preferences, though not always.

Government intervention is most easily witnessed in the form of restricting and protecting the choices people make. Some restricted choices (negative intervention), such as drug use, have penalties that can range from a lowly misdemeanor to a Class A felony. Protected choices (positive intervention), such as the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v Wade*, require the government to uphold constitutional

rights. In other words, criminalizing drug use stripped away the responsibility an individual had over the body, while *Roe v Wade* ensured that the individual is responsible for their body.

For practical and constitutional reasons, government does not or cannot intervene in all actions. These actions — those free from government intervention but not necessarily free from government influence — are for the individual to decide, such as what values parents choose to impart to their children. Nor can government tell you if and when you will have children; government is not in the bedroom. These are the actions that fall into the realm of personal responsibility: the notion that, at minimum, it is incumbent upon the individual, through little or no foreign encouragement or intervention, to do what is in their self-interest without harming themselves or others.

Not all choices are created equal, and some choices require more thinking and planning than others due to the magnitude of the action. Parents have a serious personal responsibility to raise their children well from birth providing food, shelter, and love among other things. No parent-to-be shares the same profile as another; some people are better prepared than others to parent.

Still, parents care about their children and wish the best for them. Government could tap into this sense of personal responsibility to incentivize parents' desired actions. For instance, it might create educational programs and materials to ensure that first-time parents understand their new responsibility. This type of program does not infringe upon personal responsibility, instead offering a form of enrichment or reward to the individual so all parties benefit. Perhaps, selfishly, informed and prepared parents are desirable agents for a country to mold new citizens. Society benefits the most

when all citizens have an equal opportunity to pursue life, liberty, and happiness; parents share responsibility in this endeavor.

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# Aligning Policy with Social Responsibility

WILL MARSHALL

PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE



When thinking about the relationship between personal responsibility and teen and unplanned pregnancy, we ought to keep in mind that Americans don't have much confidence in values-neutral social policies. And they positively hate government programs that seem to undermine the middle class ethic. Consider the case of welfare.

The disappearance of "welfare queens" as stock characters in America's culture wars is no accident. In "ending welfare as we know it" back in 1996, a Democratic President and Republican Congress did not simply tighten restrictions on public assistance, they changed its underlying ethos. Welfare reform — along with new efforts to make work pay and hold absent fathers accountable for supporting their children — aimed explicitly at reconciling U.S. social policy with America's creedal values of work, self-reliance, and individual responsibility. Consequently, "welfare" has lost its value as a wedge issue in political debates because it no longer connotes dependence and public subsidy for dysfunctional behavior.

Unfortunately, we're having a harder time engineering a similar normative alignment around policies aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. Americans these days are gun-shy about making value judgments about sexual behavior, even among

adolescents. To reduce teen pregnancy, conservatives prescribe teaching sexual abstinence, while liberals stress including contraception in sex education. Nor is there consensus about whether the government should — or can — promote marriage. And many progressives remain silent in the face of the media's relentless marketing of sex down the age scale, lest they be accused of being sexual reactionaries or moral censors. If parents can't even agree on basic norms of sexual behavior, no wonder their kids are so confused!

Researching teen pregnancy years ago, I was struck by the moral vacuum in which the issue was discussed on the front lines, especially in health clinics and schools. Authorities spoke only in therapeutic terms, never in the language of morality or personal responsibility. Of course kids were encouraged to use contraception — some schools featured bowls of free condoms. But most of the teen moms I spoke to admitted they wanted to have a baby. No one seemed to object much to that choice; on the contrary, a whole array of programs kicked in to help them, from prenatal care to day care for their children at school.

There is no sense in post-modern America in trying to resurrect old stigmas on early or out-of-wedlock sex. But bringing children into the world when you don't have the maturity or means to care for them properly is a different matter. That's not just a mistake, it's wrong. When teens deliberately have babies to make themselves feel special or needed, or to make their friends envious, it's tragically wrong. It's wrong because it condemns their children to repeat their mistakes, and condemns the rest of us to pay for those mistakes.

The social science is absolutely clear about the impact on children born to unwed teens. In the aggregate, kids growing up in one-parent households are much more likely to fail in school, drop out, take up

street crime, and get themselves or somebody else pregnant. Teen pregnancy isn't just a matter of personal irresponsibility, it's a matter of social irresponsibility. And society should say so.

Public policy isn't the only channel for conveying that message, but it's an important one. Welfare reform, for example, sent an important normative signal when it barred teen mothers from setting up independent households on the public's dime, and when it toughened enforcement of child support payments by "deadbeat dads." As teen birth rates start rising again, we should make sure that the government's prevention programs also are sending the right moral message.

Policy makers also need to confront the media's culpability. We now have hard evidence, thanks to a breakthrough Rand Corporation study, that viewing the growing volume of sexual content on TV leads to an increased risk of pregnancy among girls and boys. What you rarely see in films or on television, however, is gritty realism about the core of the problem: disadvantaged black and Latino girls of 14, 15, or 16 getting pregnant, dropping out of school, and renewing the dreary cycle of failure and poverty.

At a time when unfettered capitalism is being blamed for nearly wrecking the global economy, it seems odd that so many progressives accept arguments for laissez-faire in the realm of pop culture and entertainment. Artistic freedom is obviously important, but it doesn't give anyone the right to condition teenagers' behavior in ways that are individually and socially injurious. And if asking the media to police itself with rating codes and the like isn't working — and it's obviously not — policymakers need to step into the breach.

*Will Marshall is president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute. After working on Capitol Hill and in U.S. Senate campaigns, he helped to*

*launch the Democratic Leadership Council, where he served as policy director. He was an editor of the books *With All Our Might, Mandate for Change*, and *Building the Bridge: Ten Big Ideas to Transform America*, in addition to other offerings. Marshall serves as a member of the DC Public Charter School Board.*

# Teenage Responsibility

AMIE J. MCLAIN

ANCHOR/REPORTER, WRIC-TV, RICHMOND, VA



Everyday we make choices. What will I wear today? Where will I eat lunch? When will I go to sleep tonight? Although there are some choices we can't control, we usually have the authority to make our own decisions. To me, the phrase "personal responsibility" simply means being held accountable for the choices we make. When it comes to pregnancy planning and prevention, personal responsibility takes on an important role. That's because a pregnancy doesn't impact just one person; it impacts three: a woman, her partner, and her unborn child. For that reason alone, teens and young adults must be responsible when it comes to sex.

I firmly believe that God created sex as a gift to be shared only between a husband and his wife. But not everyone agrees. Most children are growing up in a society where sex is considered a normal part of adolescence. But, that doesn't mean adults should ignore it. If teens are not going to wait until marriage to have sex, we must show them how to be responsible with their bodies. Personal responsibility must be taught. And, when it comes to pregnancy prevention, teens must have good teachers. Remember, this choice isn't affecting one life, it's affecting at least three. That's why it's so important for young people to have strong role models in their lives. People they trust. People that listen. People who can help them make responsible decisions.

When more teens and young adults understand the importance of responsible behavior, there will be fewer unwanted and unplanned pregnancies.

*Amie McLain works as a television anchor/reporter for WRIC-TV in Richmond, VA. She's a proud native of New Orleans, LA. Amie comes to Richmond after spending time at NBC-2 in Ft. Meyers, FL. Prior to her time in the Sunshine State, Amie worked at the NBC station in Hagerstown, MD for two years as the weekend anchor and nightside reporter. Amie is a graduate of Howard University's John H. Johnson School of Communications in Washington, DC. While in the nation's capital, Amie also interned at some of the top media networks, including CNN, NPR, and BET.*

# Take Notice and Act

JANET MURGUÍA

PRESIDENT AND CEO, THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA



When people use the term “personal responsibility” in the context of teen pregnancy, they usually refer exclusively to the teen girl’s responsibility not to get pregnant. And surely, that’s a critical part of the equation. Young Latinas are becoming pregnant in growing numbers, and they, more than anyone else, bear the burden of seeing their dreams for success slowed to a crawl, or come to a screeching halt.

But research shows, and we know from our own experience, that every individual within every community is interdependent. Teen pregnancy has serious consequences for the mother, her children, her family, her neighbors, and, indeed, for the entire society. Therefore, it is logical to involve the whole community in the effort to address the problem.

Supporting a broader sense of individual self-worth and personal aspirations is the beginning. There is no reason why the young women in our community should have narrower hopes and dreams than their non-Hispanic peers. The ambitions of young Latina women should include advanced education and successful careers, and not be limited to fulfilling certain fixed roles. Too often, however, even their own family members don’t do enough to help them to see and follow the pathways to future success. We cannot force young women to appreciate the great

opportunities they have, but we can help remove barriers, including those first established within the family.

Until recently, teen pregnancy rates had been falling steadily, in part as a result of aggressive outreach campaigns. But because few such campaigns target Latinos, not enough of them are receiving messages encouraging them to aim high and helping them to understand how to reach their goals. It's not that difficult to engage this population, as a result of unprecedented access to media and the Internet, even immigrant Latinas are embracing — some would say too readily — American pop culture. The problem is that we haven't tried hard enough to include young Hispanic women, as well as men, in teen pregnancy prevention efforts.

And perhaps Latino organizations haven't done enough either. Teen pregnancy rarely makes the list of top Hispanic organizational priorities. We must do better and I feel a personal responsibility to elevate this issue on our community's agenda. But if we're going to see our young Latinas reach their full potential, they must believe that they can dare to dream big dreams and that we're all in this together when it comes to making those dreams come true.

*Janet Murguía has become a key figure among the next generation of leaders in the Latino community. Since 2005 she has served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.*

# Back and Forth Responsibility

CECILE RICHARDS

PRESIDENT, PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION OF AMERICA AND  
PLANNED PARENTHOOD ACTION FUND



As a mother of three, including two teenagers, I've come to realize that the whole concept of "responsibility" for young people is simply part of growing up, and it's an uneven, back-and-forth process. Each year parents give their kids more and more room to take responsibility: for their studies, for what they wear, for how they spend their time, and for how late they stay up, and how late they sleep. It's exciting, but it's also a bit overwhelming because teenagers seesaw back-and-forth between childhood and adulthood for many years. And then one day, you look up and they are totally grown.

Watching out for one's health and the health of others is just another aspect of growing up and becoming responsible. But it may be the most complicated one. As teens, you have all kinds of impulses: to do what others are doing, to fit in, to seem cool and mature — even when it means doing stuff that isn't really in your best interest. These impulses definitely include having sex before you're really ready whether physically or emotionally. So you have to be responsible for protecting yourself — or your girlfriend or boyfriend — from getting into circumstances that can lead to unhealthy situations.

A recent online survey of young people asked what they were most concerned about related to their health and wellness. Three

of the top four concerns were contracting a sexually transmitted infection, having or causing an unplanned pregnancy, and becoming involved in an unhealthy relationship. While the solution for young people may not always be defined as being more “responsible,” it’s clear that the concerns we have as parents are shared by our kids.

I believe that responsibility for sexual health is a two-way street. It is both in the teaching and in the taking. As parents we hope and expect that our kids will take responsibility for having healthy relationships, for waiting to become sexually active until they feel they are ready, and for using birth control and condoms to prevent unintended pregnancy and to keep from getting or spreading an STI. But that means we parents have responsibility, too — for talking to them openly about sex and taking the shame, stigma, and confusion away from something that is a natural and healthy part of life. We also have to take responsibility for insisting that our public officials support policies that provide young people with age-appropriate sexual health information and education. We have to take responsibility for supporting open, honest conversations about sex, sexuality, and sexual health from our living rooms to our churches, temples, and mosques, and in our schools.

Young people are looking for our support as parents, teachers, adult friends, and role models. And, even when everyone is teaching and preaching responsibility, our kids make mistakes — and, frankly, so do we. If we do our jobs as parents and adults, then we can hope that our kids, or any kid, can turn to us when they need help, when they are in crisis, or simply when they are struggling to sort through their sexual health concerns and relationships. In the end, the most important responsibility is our responsibility for each other.

*Cecile Richards is president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund. Over the course of her career, she has become a nationally recognized progressive leader and a fierce advocate for reproductive health and rights. Before joining Planned Parenthood, Ms. Richards served as deputy chief of staff for Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and played a key role in her election as the Democratic Leader in the House of Representatives.*

# A Moral Code

FRED M. RILEY

COMMISSIONER, LDS FAMILY SERVICES



Appropriately discussing the issue of personal responsibility requires the understanding that everyone develops what could be described as a value or belief system that becomes encoded within their being as a moral code. This moral code sets expectations for the individual's own behavior as well as expectations for others. Personal responsibility involves recognizing the freedom of choice and its incumbent obligation to choose wisely while living in harmony with personal beliefs and values, and accepting the consequences of their choices. The crux of the issue in relationship to personal responsibility does not lie in the philosophical battle over what is right or wrong, but rather in the inability of individuals to make decisions and behave in a manner consistent with their own moral code.

By the time individuals become teens and adults, much of their sense of moral right and wrong has been set. For parents and society to continue to barrage them with an endless diatribe of what they believe is right only builds resistance in most teenagers and young adults. Parents and society should redirect the energy they use in teaching correct principles toward strengthening the character of teens and young adults. Improving individuals' ability to be consistent and true to their own moral code will improve outcomes not only for the individuals themselves, but also for society.

In fulfilling their responsibility to themselves and society, individuals should be concerned with issues of accountability, selflessness, and their behavior's impact on others and their relationships. Unfortunately, society has replaced the importance and power of personal responsibility with the concept of personal rights. When individuals focus on rights, they reframe their thinking to worry only about themselves, their appetites, self-gratification, and lack of consequences for their own decisions and behaviors. Helping teens and young adults understand and make decisions based on a sense of responsibility — rather than ensuring his or her rights — significantly changes the decision and the behavioral patterns for good.

The solution to virtually all individual or social problems is for individuals to simply follow what they believe to be correct. The next part of the equation for individuals' personal responsibility and success rests on their ability to accept appropriate responsibility for their decisions and behavior. Today's society, unfortunately, has put forward very persuasive arguments, such as social relativism and the cry for tolerance and diversity, that encourage and allow individuals to abdicate their true responsibility.

Of all the decisions an individual makes perhaps none has as much importance as the decision of when to conceive and bear children. Unfortunately, in today's society many children are conceived and born by individuals using no process of active decision-making. The act of procreation has been reduced to a recreational activity. Few, if any, believe it is in the best interest of a child to be born to a single parent, and yet that is the choice made by nearly 40% of parents in the United States today. We must turn the tide of conception and childbearing from an unintentional accident with all of its inevitable unwanted consequences, to a well-thought out decision

with appropriate responsibility and accountability in place to ensure the well-being of all individuals involved.

The ills of most individuals and societies today are not as complex as many would like to make them. There is, in fact, a simple answer to most of today's personal and societal problems: it is simply taking personal responsibility, which primarily means finding the strength and courage to do what the individual knows to be correct, and then accepting appropriate responsibility for those decisions and actions.

*Fred M. Riley has served as Commissioner of LDS Family Services since 1996 after serving six years as Assistant Commissioner. In 2008 he was asked to direct strategic planning and development of Health Services in the Welfare Department of the LDS Church. He has served as a Bishop in the LDS Church for thirteen years. Over the years his wide range of professional experience in both the for-profit and non-profit areas, as well as his background in counseling and ecclesiastical callings have allowed him to see the best in people, organizations and institutions around the world. He continues to be dedicated to strengthening organizations, institutions and governments in ways that would enhance the quality of life for individuals and families.*

# A Crucial Intersection

REV. SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ

PRESIDENT, NATIONAL HISPANIC CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



The Cross stands as the universal Christian symbol. Not only does it embody a message of redemption, salvation, and transformation, but it also carries, even in its very physical depiction, a message of reconciling both the vertical and horizontal. Two pieces of wood facilitated a platform where a message of tolerance, forgiveness, and mercy triumphed over condemnation, hatred, and sin. Such a cross carries two elements; the vertical and the horizontal.

The vertical speaks to the values of God's Kingdom, while the horizontal speaks to our relationships here on earth. Accordingly, the cross is redemption and relational, conviction and compassion, ethos and pathos, covenant and community, ideology and missiology, God and my neighbors, John 3:16 and Matthew 25, Faith and Public Policy, Billy Graham and Martin Luther King Jr. That is, both vertical and horizontal are essential; one without the other is incomplete.

For too long in our nation, religious demagoguery has stood on the extremes of the Cross; either right or left, on the cusp of über-spirituality or on the bottom edge of secularism. All the while neglecting the fact that the strongest portion of the Cross exists where the vertical intersects with the horizontal, the nexus of heaven and earth, a point otherwise known as "personal responsibility." It is at this very intersection where we come to the

understanding that our actions have both vertical — spiritual and eternal — ramifications and horizontal — family, community, and relational — consequences.

Consequently, a viable and sustainable campaign to address one of the most serious issues in our society — teen and unwanted pregnancies — can only succeed when contextualized under the canopy of personal responsibility. Teen and unwanted pregnancies carry both vertical and horizontal elements. If we could only present a narrative in which our teenagers and young adults would understand that every decision they make will have both vertical and horizontal consequences.

For at the end of the day, as we build firewalls and multiple platforms to address and reduce teen and unwanted pregnancies, let us meet at the point of intersection, at the crossroad. There we will find personal responsibility surrounded by grace, mercy, and justice. All actions measured and with outcomes that cannot be denied. Let us not forget, personal responsibility is the child of “free will” and both live under the umbrella of righteousness and justice.

On what platform should we stand as we attempt to reduce teen and unwanted pregnancies? I say the platform located in the middle, at the point of convergence, where the will of God intersects with our free will; in a place we call “personal responsibility.”

*The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez is President of America's preeminent Latino Christian organization, The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), which serves 15 million Hispanic Christians and advocates for 40 million Hispanics on issues related to family and political, spiritual, and socio-economic empowerment. He is a prominent youth leader, a worldwide evangelist, the founding Pastor of Third Day Worship Centers, an award-winning writer, and was selected as one of Newsweek magazine's*

*Top 12 People to Look For in 2008. Rev. Rodriguez also serves on the boards of some of America's most prominent evangelical organizations, including Promise Keepers, NAE Executive Committee, World Relief, Alliance For Marriage, and Evangelicals For Human Rights.*

# A Second Sexual Revolution

WILL SALETAN

NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT, SLATE MAGAZINE



*Roe v. Wade* was decided 36 years ago. Feminism was in its adolescence. Sexual freedom was just emerging. The constitutional right to use birth control was only eight years old.

Much has changed since then. Women have gained power in politics and the economy. The election of our first female president has been delayed by the election of our first black president. Sex is everywhere — popular music, television, the Internet. Birth control is more available and reliable than ever.

It's time to grow up. It's time to stop thinking of abortion as a pillar of sexual freedom or women's empowerment. Abortion isn't synonymous with reproductive choice or with the decision not to become a parent. It's just one method of executing that decision. And it's a bad method: primitive, late, and lethal. In the vast majority of cases, it's the choice you're left with when you've already failed.

It's time for a second sexual revolution. A revolution aimed not at demanding reproductive freedom, but at using it wisely. A revolution concerned less with rights and more with responsibility.

The second sexual revolution, informed by embryology, must draw a line at conception. Not a legal line, but a moral one. It must challenge us to make wise reproductive choices — choices dictated by conscience, not by the state — before we bring new life into existence. Each of us must ask: Am I ready to become a parent?

If not, am I taking adequate precautions to prevent pregnancy?  
 Am I doing everything possible to avoid creating — and then aborting  
 — a developing human being?

If you preach or practice family planning, you understand the importance of parenthood and thinking about it before sex. I'm asking you to add a further consideration. After conception, you can still avoid parenthood. But you can't take back what you've started: the unfolding of a human embryo. If you're not willing to carry that child to term, you'll have to abort it. Take that prospect as seriously as you take the prospect of unwanted parenthood. Don't risk creating a life you can't bear.

If you believe in the right to life, I'm asking you to embrace all means of protecting it. To put it bluntly: A culture of life requires an ethic of contraception. Birth control prevents abortions. It isn't a sin or an offense against life, as too many girls and Catholic couples have been taught. It's an act of responsibility, even reverence.

That's the sexual revolution we need today: pro-choice, pro-life, practical, reflective, and conscientious. It's not impossible. It's just hard. Growing up always is.

*William Saletan is Slate's national correspondent. He writes about science, technology, politics, and society. He is the author of *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, which argues that pro-choice and pro-life activists have lost the abortion debate to a third constituency: libertarian conservatives.*

# No Excuses

JOAH SPEARMAN  
INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT



The first step in personal responsibility is admitting you're wrong without making excuses. If there ever were two more important words than personal responsibility, I haven't heard them yet. Many of this nation's greatest leaders, past and present, agree and have spoken about personal responsibility and its role in the American way of life.

Ben Franklin said, "He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else."

The lesson: don't make excuses.

Teddy Roosevelt said, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

The lesson: make the most of what you have.

John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

The lesson: seek to change yourself, then you can change the country.

Barack Obama said, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for."

The lesson: no one can make your dream a reality except you.

With these four statements — don't make excuses, make the most of what you have, make a difference, and start now — we have a pretty good idea of what personal responsibility means.

So, now that we are done with definitions let's talk about applying those two words in our lives. Personal responsibility is an integral part of everyday life.

On sports teams, there are two kinds of players — those who constantly make excuses for failure and those who constantly look for ways to do better the next time. It's usually the latter who succeed in the ultimate game of life.

In the workplace we are familiar with different types of supervisors and not all of them are enjoyable. Some of us have struggled with that supervisor who makes a mistake or poor decision on a big project and chooses to blame a subordinate instead of accepting responsibility. Alternatively, the supervisors who are unafraid to admit mistakes in judgment are the ones for whom we enjoy working the most. These are the types of stories almost any adult can tell. Unfortunately, we don't spend nearly enough time sharing these lessons of personal responsibility with young people.

And, thus, personal responsibility, or the lack thereof, has plagued our country for years now, especially when discussing family planning.

A faction of the U.S. Congress fails to accept responsibility for the failed and flawed legislation that leads to more and more teen and unplanned pregnancies. Year after year, we hear the same talking points about the need to help families and not let the government get in the way of parenting or religion. But the last time I checked, church leaders didn't seem to mind doctors offering prescriptions for Viagra nor does Congress mind making legislation that dictates how sexual education is taught. So why do the words family planning incite so many tired and lame excuses and very little personal responsibility from those who shoot down good ideas without presenting better ones?

And much like the high unplanned pregnancy rate in this country, the trend of “opposition-without-recommendation” isn’t limited to Congress. Personal responsibility should be invoked at all levels. State health officials and legislators fail to accept responsibility for policies that prevent young people from getting much-needed information about their sexual health. Even parents sometimes refuse to accept responsibility for talking to their children about relationships.

So what can be done?

For starters, we can face facts. If you spill a drink on the floor, do you look for a broom? No and the same common sense should be applied to family planning.

It’s time to stop pretending that the broom — in this case, abstinence-only education — is the most effective tool to prevent teen pregnancies. It’s time to look for a mop, a paper towel, or some other proven method and not the broom that’s only spreading the mess instead of cleaning it up.

Don’t get me wrong, there are some “messes” that certainly can be remedied with a broom here or there. Abstinence is a very essential component of family planning. Teens should learn to treat sex and relationships with a higher level of respect and value. Waiting until later in life to become sexually-active is much preferred. I love the idea of abstinence education. It’s the abstinence-only part that gets in the way of truly making a difference.

Again, you can’t clean the wet floor with only a broom. We also need to use a mop and whatever other methods there are that have been proven to be effective at cleaning the floor or, in this case, preventing unplanned pregnancy in America.

Luckily, there are organizations and officials around the country giving us plenty of examples of how to approach this mess.

In Michigan, Surgeon General Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom is spearheading the state's efforts to reduce teen pregnancy by getting more involved in communities and cities like Detroit.

In colleges and universities all over the nation, health departments are stepping up their efforts to get information to students who are sexually active and are trying to make healthy decisions.

Neither Dr. Wisdom in Michigan nor those university health departments are proselytizing their beliefs about family planning. Instead, they are focusing on personal responsibility: "If you want to have good health and make good decisions about your sexual activity, we will help you as best we can."

Meanwhile, the opponents of such efforts are doing and saying the exact opposite: "We will help you by making your decisions about health and sexual activity for you; otherwise good luck."

Something tells me — based on the widely-available statistics at the state and federal levels that indicate a consistently high level of unplanned pregnancies — the latter approach isn't exactly working out the way you would be led to believe.

In writing this, it is my whole-hearted hope that the people behind such ineffective solutions will heed the words of Franklin, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Obama. Because, part of personal responsibility is admitting when you've been wrong instead of making excuses or blaming others.

*Joah Spearman has written speeches for Cabinet-level politicians, articles for an array of magazines and websites including Tom Joyner's Radio Show and the University of Texas at Austin, and is the author of the upcoming book, Real Role Models, a profile book about successful African-American professionals. An avid blogger, Joah now lives and works in Austin, TX, where he consults a number of businesses*

*and non-profit organizations on communications strategies that rely on social media.*

# Spiderman Doctrine

LAURA SESSIONS-STEPP  
SENIOR MEDIA FELLOW, THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO  
PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY



*“Whatever life holds in store for me, I will never forget these words:  
With great power comes great responsibility.”*

— Peter Parker, aka Spiderman

Today’s sexually active young women are learning the truth of the Spiderman doctrine and that the truth can hurt.

Hooking up — the casual sexual behavior that has replaced dating for many of their generation — gives women more power than their mothers had to pursue and drop partners freely. But it also requires a high degree of vigilance because if they become pregnant, infected with disease, or simply abandoned by their partner they, often more than their partners, will feel accountable and lousy.

My email box is full of examples. One college sophomore wrote about being raped by a man she hooked up with. “I always felt empowered during sex because I could get anyone I wanted to have sex with me,” she said. “What I didn’t realize was how powerless I was.” A 27-year-old wrote about hooking up with one man and getting pregnant, then giving birth, being abandoned, finding and marrying another man and a year after the marriage still trying to figure out how to love. Another college student described meeting a man at a party and making out with him on three different occasions.

They weren't in what she would call a relationship, she said. She wasn't sure, in fact, what she would call it. The fourth time they got together they had sex. She didn't hear from him after that. "Who was responsible in that situation?" she asked. "I've always heard that women had the power...I guess I was responsible for saying 'Yes,' but he should be responsible enough to call me."

"Years ago," she sighed, "Everything was black and white."

She's not entirely correct, of course. There was plenty of role ambiguity in the dating behavior of earlier generations. If unwanted things happened, such as a pregnancy, the young woman did incur blame, as indicated in the curious phrase "she got herself pregnant." Once the birth control pill became widely available, women shouldered even more responsibility.

But it was also the case, even in the 1960s, that if the young woman wanted to keep her baby, she and others anticipated that the baby's father would marry her. Also, sex was something a couple was expected to have only after they were married or at least in a committed relationship. Men — and couples — may or may not have acted more responsibly back then, but the cultural expectation that they should was a restraining force.

Absent that expectation, many young women today feel more responsible for the outcome of casual sex and many men feel less. "Every day I am hit on by guys who don't want to date me, but want to f—me....," a college freshman wrote.

A group of college students, sitting with their coffee in a campus dining room, had this to say:

"Say you're making out," one young woman started. "A guy will ask, 'Are you on birth control?'"

If you answer yes, a young man continued, the guy assumes he won't have to work hard to get her into bed. "Birth control's a green light," he added.

Another young man said he doesn't even talk about birth control with a partner. "Girls should be responsible for that," he said.

These young people had no doubt who is better off.

"Because girls are more assertive," said one young man, "it's easy for us to be assholes."

Young people today are active in service- and civic-oriented activities and careers in proportions exceeding earlier generations. They're good, bright women and men. They know that something is askew in their sexual culture.

But they have no idea how to change it and that is a terrible place to be.

*Laura Sessions-Stepp, a former reporter for The Washington Post, is a senior media fellow at The National Campaign. She is the author of two books, Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence (Riverhead/Penguin) and Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both (Riverhead/Penguin).*

# A Healthy Paradigm

JAMES WAGONER  
PRESIDENT, ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH



Responsibility is a two-way street. Young people have the responsibility to make good choices when it comes to protecting their sexual and reproductive health. Adults have the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to thrive in adolescence and to develop into sexually healthy adults.

We get into trouble when we focus on only one end of the responsibility equation in our society. Expecting young people to make healthy choices about sexuality when adult policy makers censor sex education and limit access to services is not a model for responsible behavior — it's an example of social hypocrisy.

By the same token, removing all expectations around young people's sexual health behavior is short-sighted and damaging. Young people have the responsibility to use the tools they are given to make good decisions — to avoid early sexual initiation, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infection. Responsibility also entails respect — taking the needs of others into account, particularly in relationships. And, once again, the value of respect in a social context is reciprocal. Society as a whole needs to take young people's relationships, ideas, and beliefs seriously.

Finally, responsibility entails rights. Young people have the right to education and information which enable them to take personal responsibility for important life decisions. Young people also

have the right to be safe and healthy within a relationship — free from physical or emotional coercion. They have the right to make decisions based on their own personal values and beliefs.

It is my belief that these three core values — rights, respect, and responsibility — are inextricably entwined and form the foundation of a healthy paradigm for adolescent sexual health and development.

*James Wagoner, a respected public policy and reproductive health expert, has been the President and Executive Director of Advocates for Youth since September 1997. He spent seven years at NARAL, most recently as Executive Vice-President. During the decade prior to that, James served on the staff of Senator Howard M. Metzenbaum from Ohio. He is a graduate of Georgetown University.*

# A Moral Center

JIM WALLIS

PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SOJOURNERS



There is a mistake, a misperception, a failed understanding that has hurt our society and country deeply. Our politics, our media, and our culture are too often divided into two separate camps, neither of which trust each other. In one camp are those who believe society's woes stem from irresponsible policies and in the other are those who believe that they come from irresponsible behavior. One focuses on the personal, the other on the societal.

In the real world, people in both camps know that there is truth in the other side. When there is an opportunity to have real conversation and not just a shouting match, you will hear just that being said. In public debate however, each side gets worried that it will look like the other side has "won" and they push out further to either extreme.

There does exist however, what I call a "moral center." It is in this radical center that we find common ground and indeed, what most of us really believe. That belief recognizes that healthy communities, societies and countries are based in "responsible behavior, responsible policies," not just one or the other.

No place is this tension more real and the need for a radical center more clear than when it comes to sex. Sex has become a commodity. A product to be chopped up, doled out, mass produced and sold. As I write, a 22 year-old young woman has offered up her

virginity in an online auction run through a Nevada brothel. The bids have now hit 3.7 million dollars. This of course, is small change compared to the money major TV networks now make selling sex during primetime.

There is a strong cultural force that encourages us to look at everything as a commodity- including our relationships, our bodies, and our values. And everyone is for sale. The real enemy here isn't sex, but when we turn all values into market values, gutting the world of genuine love, caring, compassion, connection, and commitment for what will sell on a TV show or Ebay.

My faith teaches that sex has meaning, it has value. Making the choice to engage or not engage in sexual activities has consequences. Those consequences are personal and societal. But my faith also teaches that it is not sex that is the problem, it is failing to value sex that is the problem.

“Sexual freedom” is never free. It is always paid for.

*Jim Wallis is a bestselling author, public theologian, speaker, preacher, and international commentator on religion and public life, faith, and politics. His latest book is *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (HarperOne, 2008). His previous book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (Harper Collins, 2005), was on *The New York Times* bestseller list for four months. He is President and Chief Executive Officer of Sojourners, where he is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine and his columns appear in major newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and both *Time* and *Newsweek* online.*

# Personal Responsibility— It Has a Nice “Ring” to It

ROLAND C. WARREN  
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE



We know from research that most of the unplanned and teen pregnancies in our nation are out-of-wedlock pregnancies that too often put moms, dads and, most importantly, children, at risk for an array of negative social, emotional, and financial outcomes. Accordingly, what could be a more powerful strategy to change these outcomes than promoting and supporting an institution, which, by design, prevents out-of-wedlock pregnancies and requires personal responsibility? The institution I am referring to is wedlock.

My father was a teen father. I was essentially a teen father, and I grew up in a father-absent home. My two sons were not and did not. My decision to marry my boys’ mother enabled me to break a pernicious cycle in my family and pass on a legacy that was better than the one that I inherited. When I got the mother of my children pregnant, there was much I did not know, but what I did know from personal experience is that “it’s difficult to be what you don’t see.” My children needed to see me doing and being what I had not seen...a married and involved father.

You see, my sons grew up during the 80s and 90s, a time when teen pregnancy, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and, more troubling, “multi-partner fertility” — having children with multiple partners

— was making historic rises. But my two sons, thankfully, did not fall into that trap because their mother and I stressed that pregnancy and sexual activity’s best homes are within marriage. In short, we told them, “No ring, no thing.” We also stressed that out-of-wedlock pregnancies and especially multi-partner fertility make it much more difficult for a father to be fully engaged in his children’s lives — to provide for them financially and emotionally. The data are clear that non-resident fathers, many of whom have children with more than one mother, have more limited contact with their children.

Indeed, marriage is the best societal “glue” we have to connect fathers to their children — heart to heart — and to the mother of their children for the long haul. Its unique and distinctive purpose is to align the interests of fathers and mothers in the best interest of their children. It is designed to make responsibility “personal” and lasting.

So for me, personal responsibility — when it comes to what is best for children — has a nice “ring” to it.

*As president of the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), Roland is dedicated to NFI’s mission of improving the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children that are raised with involved, responsible, and committed fathers. Through Roland’s leadership, the organization has quickly become one of the nation’s leading providers of fatherhood resources to communities, schools, prisons, hospitals, businesses, the military, and churches. FatherSOURCE™, a national fatherhood resource center run by NFI, now offers the most extensive assortment of specialized fatherhood resources in the world.*

# Creating a Culture of Responsible and Safe Sex

JESSICA WECHTER

GRADUATE STUDENT, INDIANA UNIVERSITY



The obligation to help prevent unplanned pregnancy has meant different things throughout my life. As an adolescent, it was my job to inquire and listen rather than shy away from awkward puberty talks with Mom and Dad. I remember shedding tears the day my period arrived within days of my departure for a summer sleep-away camp. I was mortified but found comfort in my mother's kind words and pragmatic advice. Later that night, my parents commemorated the rite of passage with a family dinner and left the door wide open to talk about anything at any time. While I can't recall the intricate details of the sex talks that followed, I do know that whatever my parents said, they led me to believe that no matter what I made of myself, I would be okay and they'd love me along the way. Unquestionably, it was this foundation at home that enabled me to become a self-respecting and confident woman.

While these conversations with my parents nurtured my soul and sense of responsibility, I knew that many of my peers were not getting the same holistic or accurate information in their households, and narrow school health curriculums fell short too. In response, I assumed a volunteer, peer, sex-educator position with my local Planned Parenthood affiliate. As a member of Teen Talk,

I facilitated workshops for middle and high school youth to teach students how to respond to the pressure to have sex, and behave responsibly if they did engage in sexual activity.

Now at 27 and five years into a monogamous relationship, my role in creating a culture of responsible and safe sex has transitioned from working directly with youth to supporting the cause in other ways. It remains important that I remember to integrate all of the communication and decision-making principles that I taught others into my own relationship, and counsel my female and male friends alike, so that an unwanted pregnancy doesn't get in the way of our respective ambitions. I chose a partner that embraces a man's role in prevention and planning. When we first started dating, we refrained from sex until we were ready to seriously discuss the benefits and risks involved. More recently, our conversations revolve around plans for our future together — marriage, home-buying, careers — yet, we still behave in a way that allows us to be comfortable with the consequences of our choices. While neither of us is certain if our eventual union will include children, undoubtedly we agree that we are not ready for them now. Consequently, sex in our relationship is loving, consensual, and protected.

My current obligations also extend beyond the bedroom to the reproductive health community at large. As a young professional my financial means are limited, but I firmly believe that I should still contribute in some way to groups on the front lines of this work. Although it is often my time that is more abundant than money, I give what and when I can to help advocate for progressive laws, leaders, and nonprofits that promote comprehensive dialogue and responsible behavior everywhere.

*Jessica Wechter is currently a master of public affairs (MPA) candidate at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University Bloomington, pursuing concentrations in nonprofit management and policy analysis. She is also an assistant on the Indiana Nonprofits: Scope and Community Dimensions Project. Previously, Jessica worked as a graphic designer for Conservation International's Center for Environmental Leadership in Business and served as Vice Chair of the Women's Information Network, both in Washington, DC.*

# Reflections

KIMBERLYDAWN WISDOM, MD, MS  
SURGEON GENERAL, STATE OF MICHIGAN  
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HENRY FORD HEALTH SYSTEM



In the state of Michigan and across the nation we have had much to celebrate over the last few decades with the steady decline of teen pregnancy rates. Supportive public policies, advances in contraceptive technology, enhanced access to care, increases in public education (particularly in response to the HIV epidemic) — have all contributed significantly to the declining rates of teen pregnancy. Yet, the time for celebrating may be over; in Michigan, as well as nationally, there have been recent increased in teen pregnancy and birth rates. This disheartening news calls all of us to reflect on this issue in different ways; clearly, education and access to resources and services are not always enough to ensure that a person or couple does not experience an unintended pregnancy. It is time to include in the dialogue not only public policy but a deeper examination of personal responsibility.

With supportive public policies, we can give individuals the external supports they may need to avoid teen and unintended pregnancies, but it is up to them to access those resources. Ultimately, the only people who can prevent a pregnancy are the individuals involved in the sexual act; they are the ones who are responsible. From the large body of research on health behavior

and on adolescent asset development, however, we know that there is a complex web of factors that influence personal health behavior and support the ability of individuals to recognize, understand and respond appropriately to the consequences of one's behavior — to act “responsibly.” All the best services and information may be rendered useless if given to a young person with a hopeless world view and low self-esteem, who cannot see a bright future and who feels incapable of altering it. At the same time that we emphasize individual responsibility, we need to emphasize our collective responsibility; each of us has a role to play in reducing adolescent and unintended pregnancies by helping young people take charge of their sexual health.

At home, in schools, in faith communities, in clinics, and in the media and entertainment industries all across our communities, we each have the responsibility to promote basic core values and positively address the factors that influence personal health behaviors. We need to support clear, positive messages about personal responsibility.

Taking care of and understanding that your health is important is also key. Adults themselves have the responsibility to learn about and respond to personal health issues, including sexual health, and assist youth in accessing age-appropriate, accurate, comprehensive information. Thinking about and addressing needs for family planning is a priority health issue for all people who are sexually active or considering becoming so, males and females alike.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Young people need strong self-esteem and self-efficacy to carry out healthy choices and behave responsibly; they need to love themselves and know that what happens to them matters. They also must view mutual respect as the required basis for all healthy relationships. As a society, we have the

responsibility to respect and protect all members of our community from sexual abuse and exploitation.

With freedom, comes responsibility. We all have, to some extent, the freedom to choose our path and impact our destiny. At the same time, if we have the freedom to make choices about our behaviors, those choices come with consequences: a pregnancy creates consequences not only for the mother, but also for the father, the extended family, and, most of all, for the child. We need to emphasize that the consequences of unintended pregnancies are to be borne by both the mother and the father.

We can teach basic personal decision-making from an early age, in our homes, schools, and faith communities. Young people need to learn the appropriate processes and resources for gathering information, weighing the benefits and consequences of a variety of actions, and making a decision. Parents and other leaders need to be role models for informed decision-making and for taking responsibility for the consequences of their choices. And parents and caregivers need to understand the importance of talking early and often to their teenagers.

With responsibilities, come rights. Individuals have the right to clear, complete, accurate, and age-appropriate information about pregnancy, pregnancy prevention, and parenting. Individuals have the right to safe, healthy, and respectful relationships. Individuals have the right to respectful, compassionate, and informed health care providers and services.

It is our own personal choices and commitments that will make the difference in our health and the health of our communities. Unless we all take greater responsibility for ourselves, our families and our communities, our collective health will not improve. Each

person must be encouraged to see that preventing unintended pregnancies is within his/her control.

*Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom is the Surgeon General of Michigan. She practiced medicine for 20 years at the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, MI. She also founded and directed both the Institute of Multicultural Health at Henry Ford Health System and a National Minority Quality Forum award-winning community-based health screening initiative entitled AIMHI (African-American Initiative for Male Health Improvement) focused on improving the health of those disproportionately affected by poor health outcomes — African-American men. She is an Assistant Professor of Medical Education at the University of Michigan Medical Center and serves as adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.*

# Everyone Is Responsible

ALMA T. YOUNG, MSW, ED.D.

ASSISTANT CLINICAL PROFESSOR,

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MOUNT SINAI SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



Generally, personal responsibility begins at an early age and is seen as a continuous process, whereby learning takes place through experience and exposure. During this time, children are taught at home, at the playground, at school, and in other situations to which they are exposed. Parents, caregivers, teachers, and all adults who participate in the learning activities are influential in how personal responsibility is acquired. During adolescence (perhaps as pre-teens) young people are increasingly exposed to a wider range of socialization; they become preoccupied with body changes, they seek acceptance and close relationships with peers, and their desire for independence and less contact with authority figures are most apparent.

How adolescents apply or utilize the early experiences of personal responsibility depends to some extent on their attitudes toward those individuals who are influential in their lives and the attitudes of society toward them. As contributors to this continuous process of learning, each person plays a unique role in helping teenagers and young adults develop new and more mature relationships with peers of both sexes, to adopt socially acceptable roles, and to plan for the future.

As our society becomes more complex, personal responsibility in pregnancy prevention/planning will no doubt require new strategies to help teenagers and young adults to deal with self-esteem, peer pressure, and personal gratification, as well as varied health and social needs related to childbearing and childrearing. Life planning will require participation from family members, peers, healthcare providers, educators, community and religious leaders, political officials, and others in order to achieve a measure of success.

*Dr. Young is a former practitioner/administrator of social work and education in the Department of Social Work Services at Mount Sinai Medical Center. Currently, she maintains faculty position as Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Community and Preventative Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She has a long history of participation in leadership roles on non-profit boards and organizations providing services to children, adolescents, and family groups as well as those involved in education, health, and public service; including the American Public Health Association, the National Association of Social Workers, New Alternatives for Children, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America.*

## Some Final Thoughts...



*“Personal Responsibility is born from the marriage of straight talk and self respect and nurtured in an environment of honest conversations.”*

—Paula Parker Sawyers

Now that you have read the thoughts of some extraordinary people, I want to offer a few final ideas for readers to ponder. Specifically, how do you, dear reader, answer the question our essayists have wrestled with: “What is personal responsibility as it relates to pregnancy planning and prevention?”

For me, the answer can be found in a tool seldom used these days...straight talk; honest conversation with no apology. One example of sexual straight talk that I remember very clearly is the evolution in the conversations many parents had with their children about body parts. What started as a chat largely dominated with imaginary names for male and female reproductive organs progressed into talks that generally used anatomically correct words to describe body parts. Straight talk. The simple point here is that straight talk, honest conversations, and a strong sense of self-respect can help children move gracefully from adolescence to adulthood with fewer unexpected detours from their life’s plan, like an unplanned pregnancy.

Parents need more straight talk. Unfortunately, it is still the case that parents too often seem to fear their own children’s opinions and questions about sex and related issues. As a result, we

parents often fail to answer even the most basic question inquisitive children have: “How did I get here?” And so begins a game of cat and mouse that often sends an unknowing, inexperienced, scared, and unsure child into the world. Given our lack of candor as parents, should we be surprised that too many youth are willing to cling to anyone and anything just trying to make sense of the confused world in which they live. Should we be surprised that fully half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned?

Young adults need more straight talk as well. Too often young adults use the term personal responsibility as a license to do what they want when they want. The consequences of the decisions they make about sex are too often ignored, denied, or not even considered. For young adults, straight talk from doctors should be prescribed, from faith leaders anticipated, and from parents expected — all in an effort to help young adults better understand the transformation from being a carefree dependent to being a self-respecting, responsible adult.

Public policy should be imbued with straight talk. With respect to teen and unplanned pregnancy, personal responsibility is the foundation upon which public policy is developed to serve all citizens. The challenge is not to define personal responsibility but to demonstrate through responsible policies a belief in the individual’s ability and right of self determination along with a strong emphasis on the reality that actions have consequences.

The complicated intersection of personal responsibility, pregnancy planning, and family formation has been well explored in this volume. Of course, conversations about these issues are taking place everyday and will long be debated. That is good. Dialogue often brings forth a greater understanding of mutual problems while also

revealing the difficult solutions that may need to be addressed. We hope that communities will use these essays to discuss, debate, and find solutions to the nation's stubbornly high rates of teen and unplanned pregnancy.

Visit our website at <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/responsibility/> to learn more about teen and unplanned pregnancy, post a blog and tell us what your community is doing, and use our discussion guides to begin a little straight talk and honest conversations in your home, your place of worship, and your community.

*Paula Parker-Sawyers is the Director of Outreach and Partnerships for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Paula has held positions in both the public and private sectors, including serving as Deputy Mayor of the City of Indianapolis and serving on the Indianapolis City-County Council.*

# Mission of The National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.



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