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# SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND THE CATHOLIC TEENAGER: A REPORT

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*This article reports on findings of a study of sexuality education in a Catholic diocese. The sample included seniors enrolled in either Catholic high schools or parish religious education programs. The range of findings include data about students' knowledge of sexuality, their understanding of Catholic Church teaching about sexuality, their attitudes and values in regard to sexuality, who and what influences their attitudes and values, their sexual behaviors, and their experience of sexuality education. Recommendations for parents and formal sexuality education programs are offered.*

Adolescent sexuality education receives considerable attention from educators and parents, most of it focused on teenage sexual behavior and how that behavior is and might be influenced and shaped. Researchers study adolescent sexuality and sexuality education to provide information that informs parents, teachers, and education programs. A highly relevant source of information is adolescents themselves. What do they know and understand about sexuality and its meanings? Where do they get their information? What are their attitudes and values with regard to sex? Do they understand Catholic teaching about sexuality? Who and what influences their sexual attitudes and values? What are their sexual behaviors? What do they learn from formal sexuality education? These questions and others were asked in a study of Catholic sexuality education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that the social and political context in which sexuality education takes place is an important factor that can seriously influence the overall approach to sexuality, shape the content of formal sexuality education, and generate controversy (Algozzine, Berne, & Huberman, 1995; Brick & Roffman, 1993; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Herold, 1997; Maddock, 1997; Males, 1993; McKinney, 1987; Wieder, 1996; Yarber, 1992). Generally, public approval of and demand for better sexuality education has increased (First, 1992), but there remains much debate and controversy about two approaches to sexuality education, the comprehensive approach and the direct or abstinence only approach.

Research contends that effective sexuality education is longitudinal and proactive (Croft & Asmussen, 1992), acknowledges the complex realities of life (Brick & Roffman, 1993), goes well beyond knowledge of the biological functioning of the human (Carter & Carter, 1995; Yarber, 1992), and integrates a range of personal and social factors that involve the whole person (Barlett, 1993; Carter & Carter, 1995; Haffner, 1996; Maddock, 1997; Roffman, 1994; Stackhouse, 1990). Lickona (1993) criticizes a comprehensive approach and calls for abstinence only education that applies core ethical values. Others conclude that greater attention should be given to the moral framework of sexuality education, the development of character, values, and attitudes (Craig, 1993; Natale, 1995; Olsen, Weed, Nielsen, & Jensen, 1992; Reiss, 1995; Whitehead, 1994). Haffner (1992) and Stackhouse (1990) have shown that organized religion can play a dynamic role in promoting sexuality education, and that religious groups and leaders can be key to the development of sensitive, responsive programs for young people. Stackhouse also finds that religious bodies that incorporate into their theology of sexuality such factors as scripture, tradition, symbol, human experience, and reason are typically more supportive of sexuality education.

Sexuality education is often conceived as a means of lowering teen pregnancy rates and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. A number of studies have, therefore, examined the relationship between sexuality education, sexual activity, use of contraception, and whether or not sexuality education does in fact effect adolescent behavioral change; their findings vary considerably. Kirby's research (1992) indicates that comprehensive theoretically-based curricula can change risky adolescent sexual behaviors. Other studies draw similar conclusions about the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Coyle et al., 1996; Gant, Hwalek, & Dix, 1994; Kirby, Barth, Leland, & Fetro, 1991; Natale, 1995; Suri, 1994). Some have found an increase in and more consistent use of effective contraceptive methods by adolescents after participating in sexuality education (Christopher, 1995; Eisen, Zellman, & McAlister, 1990). Others have found that sexuality education neither reduces the frequency of adolescent sexual activity nor that it promotes increased or earlier sexual activity (Grunseit, Kippax, Aggleton, Baldo, & Slutkin, 1997; Haffner, 1994; Jacobs & Wolf, 1995; Roffman, 1994). While some claim that abstinence only education is successful (Lickona, 1994), and others claim that it is not (Sanderson & Wilson, 1991; Whatley & Trudell, 1993), still others have found that programs, either comprehensive or abstinence only, have little or no effect on adolescent sexual behavior (Males, 1993; Miller et al., 1993; Stout & Rivara, 1989) or that the effect is short-term (Turner, Korpita, Mohn, & Hill, 1993). Shamaï and Coombs (1992) suggest that sexuality education cannot change behaviors that are prevalent in culture, and Dailey (1997) concludes that program effectiveness cannot be accurately demonstrated.

Studies about sexuality education support an interactive involvement of parents, schools, and community. Experts generally consider that parents are

the primary sexuality educators of their children and need to be educated and supported in order to contribute to the healthy development of their children (Baldwin & Bauer, 1994; Hockenberry-Eaton, Richman, Dilorio, Rivero, & Maibach, 1996; Webb, 1994). Educators also suggest that every attempt should be made to coordinate efforts between families, schools, and community (Croft & Asmussen, 1992; Leming, 1993; Welshimer & Harris, 1994; Wilson, 1994).

Studies have shown that program outcomes and effectiveness may be related to teachers' values and attitudes toward teaching sexuality (De Gaston, Jensen, Weed, & Tanas, 1994; Greenberg, 1989; Haignere, Culhane, Balsley, & Legos, 1996). Greenberg (1989) and Krueger (1991) found that teachers' knowledge base and methodological skills are key to program effectiveness. Researchers urge policymakers and school administrators to equip teachers, counselors, and others with ongoing education, research, and resources (Beck & Marshall, 1992; De Gaston et al., 1994; Haignere et al., 1996; Krueger, 1991; Moglia, 1990; Rodriguez, Young, Renfro, Asencio, & Haffner, 1997; Roffman, Shannon, & Dwyer, 1997) and to devise programs with specific goals and solid methodology in order to overcome inadequacies and limitations on the part of teachers (Black, 1995; Cross, 1991).

Of particular importance to this study of sexuality education for Catholic adolescents is the teaching of the Catholic Church, which contextualizes the findings and establishes their importance for Catholic education. A summary of that teaching and its development is essential to the interpretation and implementation of the findings of this study and its recommendations. Church teaching about sexuality divides into two broad time frames, pre- and post-Vatican II. The pre-Vatican II approach to sexuality, under the negative and ubiquitous influence of Augustine of Hippo, was ambiguous. On the one hand, sexuality was judged good because it was created by God. On the other hand, sexuality was judged to be disordered by concupiscence derived from original sin. Sex easily escapes rational control and becomes simply lust. If a man or a woman must use others for personal sexual pleasure, therefore, it must be only in the context of marriage and to fulfill the primary end of marriage, procreation (Kosnik, Carroll, Cunningham, Modras, & Schulte, 1977; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1989). The Code of Canon Law prescribed, therefore, in 1917: "The primary end of marriage is the procreation and nurture of children; its secondary end is mutual help and the remedying of concupiscence" (Canon Law Society, Can 1013, §1).

Pre-Vatican II Catholic teaching on sexuality can be summarized in two magisterial statements. First, "sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, #2360) and, therefore, every moral sexual, and especially genital, act must be within the framework of marriage (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1976). Sexual sin includes every sexual act not within the legitimate framework of marriage: lust, masturbation, pre-marital intercourse (fornication), extra-marital intercourse (adultery),

pornography, prostitution, rape (Catechism, 1994, #2351-2356). Second, within marriage, “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” (Catechism, 1994, #2366; Paul VI, 1968, #11). “Periodic continence...and the use of infertile periods is in conformity” (*Catechism*, 1994, #2370) with this principle and moral. In contrast, “every action which...proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible” (Catechism, 1994, #2370; Paul VI, 1968, #14) is contrary to this principle and immoral (John Paul II, 1982). Artificial contraception, therefore, is an offense against this principle, as are adultery, divorce, and cohabitation or “free unions” (*Catechism*, 1994, #2390). It should be noted that the magisterial statements chosen to summarize pre-Vatican II Catholic teaching on sexuality are dated after Vatican II. That is because the theological changes introduced by the Council, in sexual and particularly marital matters, as in many others, have not been officially integrated into Catholic doctrine.

The Second Vatican Council deliberately rejected the pre-Vatican II approach to sexuality as a Catholic approach in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In preparation for the Council the Theological Commission, headed by the Vatican theologian Ottaviani, drew up a schema, *De Castitate, Virginitate, Matrimonio*, which reiterated pre-Vatican II teachings about sexuality. The Central Preparatory Commission, which vetted documents to be presented to the Council, resoundingly rejected that schema and commissioned a new one which, after much obstinate and sometimes spiteful debate, became part of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (Haring, 1969).

Ottaviani's schema set forth a pre-Vatican II theology of marriage: it is a contract, the object of which is the exchange of the spouses' bodies for acts suitable for procreation, and the ends of which are as articulated in the 1917 Code of Canon Law (Second Vatican Council, 1968). The Council chose, instead, a more personalist approach: marriage is more than a legal contract, it is a religious covenant, the object of which is the total personal gift of the spouses (not just their bodies) to one another, and the ends of which are the mutual love of the spouses and the procreation of children, with no specification of primary or secondary ends. Both marriage and the marital love of the spouses “are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown” (Paul VI, 1965, #48), but that “does not make the other purposes of marriage of less account” and marriage “is not instituted solely for procreation” (Paul VI, 1965, #50). The essential equality of the ends of marriage was confirmed as the Catholic approach by “the last conciliar document” (Burke, 1989, p. 217), the 1983 Code of Canon Law: “the marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its very own nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has...been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (Canon Law Society, Can 1055, §1).

Spouses and the mutual love that creates and is created by their marriage are emphasized, in a personalistic perspective, in contemporary Catholic theology and

marriage law (Lawler, 1993, 2002). This perspective contextualizes physical acts by focusing on persons (Cahill, 1996), which leads to a different approach to decisionmaking about sexuality in the Catholic moral tradition (Cahill, 1996; Gudorf, 1994; Gula, 1989; Kosnik et al., 1977). A personalist approach to morality also acknowledges that freedom and knowledge are necessary conditions for the moral life, and that the morality of any human action must consider the moral development of the person and the person's degree of freedom and knowledge. This approach leads Catholic theologians to suggest that the sexual acts of unmarried men and women might, in certain contexts, be entirely moral. Such Catholic theological thinking, however, has not been integrated into official Catholic teaching.

The teaching of the Church about sexuality education is that it is "not reducible to a set of simple teaching materials about human organ systems and their biological functions" (United States Catholic Conference, 1997, p. 75), that it "must consider the totality of the person and insist therefore on the integration of the biological, psycho-affective, social and spiritual elements" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983, #35), and that personal formation, including sexuality formation, is a "permanent process" characterized by "a constant evolution" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983, #41). The Church also insists that the selection of teachers for sexuality instruction programs must be done carefully, for "not everyone who is a competent teacher or catechist will be an effective sexuality educator" (USCC, 1997, p. 81).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study was conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University on behalf of a Catholic diocese to assess students' basic knowledge about sexuality, their understanding of Catholic teaching about sexuality, attitudes toward and values related to sexuality, and their sexual behaviors. Because other factors are directly related to students' sexual knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors, the study gathered additional information, including students' perception of the content and quality of the sexuality education they received, information about their family and peers, their school and church activities, and general demographic information. Study findings were used as part of an ongoing evaluation and revision of sexuality education in both diocesan schools and parishes. Data from this study also generated and informed a new diocesan program designed to assist parents in their role as the primary sexuality educators of their children.

## **METHOD**

### **PROCEDURES**

A total of 8 Catholic high schools and 15 parish religious education programs were selected on the basis of their geographical location and size of student body. From the possible 1,213 seniors enrolled in the fall of 1998, 900 were

selected on the basis of overall representation of the urban-rural nature of the diocese.

Catholic school principals and parishes received letters from Catholic education officials explaining the study and asking for their cooperation and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of students and parents. Because parental consent was required for students' participation in this study, parents of the selected students were sent materials that explained the study and asked for parental consent. They received: a letter from the local bishop explaining the importance of the study, a letter from the Center for Marriage and Family explaining how the study would be conducted, two copies of a consent form, and a postage-paid return envelope.

Of the 900 parents who received the mailing, 464 (52%) indicated, either by returned consent form or taped telephone conversation, whether or not they gave consent for their child's participation. Of the 464 respondents, 362 (40%) gave consent. Of the 362 students who had parental consent and participated, 292 responded to the survey for an effective response rate of 81%. Some students had parental consent but did not participate in the survey for several reasons, which included absence, detention, homework, and other activities.

The survey was conducted during regular school hours for Catholic school students and at times arranged by parish personnel for religious education program students. Researchers from the Center for Marriage and Family administered the survey in a group setting at each location. No school or parish personnel were present while the students completed the survey, which took an average of 35 minutes. All surveys were confidential and anonymous.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

All respondents were high school seniors who attended either a Catholic school (79%) or a parish religious education program (21%). The large majority was Catholic (96%) and Caucasian (96%), and lived with their married biological parents (87%). Just over half (56%) were female and 44% were male. The majority of respondents' parents were Catholic and had at least a bachelors degree. Respondents had an average of 2.74 siblings, split nearly evenly between brothers and sisters. The large majority (80%) reported the ages of their friends were the same as their own ages. Most (63%) reported they and their friends were the same religion.

## **MEASURES**

The questionnaire used for this study was designed jointly by the research team and representatives of the Catholic diocese. Its primary foci were respondents' general knowledge of sexuality, their attitudes and values related to sexuality, their understanding of Church teaching about sexuality, their experience of sexuality education and its influence, the influence of parents, siblings, and peers, and their sexual behaviors.

*Knowledge* was measured by statements to which respondents answered either “yes” or “no.” *Attitudes* were measured by statements to which participants responded on a 5-point Likert Scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. *Values* were measured by questions asking for “yes” or “no” responses, or asking for level of importance or acceptance, and by questions about persons who influenced sexual values. Survey items about respondents’ informal and formal sexuality education included questions about issues discussed, ease of discussing issues within the context of sexuality education, and quality of sexuality education. Survey items about family and peers focused on respondents’ discussion of sexuality and related issues. Respondents were asked if they discussed a number of particular issues with mother, father, sisters, brothers, and friends and to rate how easy it was to discuss each issue on a 4-point scale from *very easy* to *very difficult*. Survey items about sexual behaviors included questions about school and church activities, use of television and the internet, dating, relationships and decision making, and particular types of sexual activities experienced.

The survey included two open-ended questions asking respondents what they thought should be included and excluded in sexuality education classes. General demographic information about respondents and their mothers and fathers was also included in the survey. Differences between female and male students are reported only when the difference is significant. Data were analyzed using the statistical software program SPSS.

## **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

The strength of this study is that its findings are consumer-generated, that is, they derive from students who are the consumers of sexuality education and not from professionals theorizing about what students need in this area. Because this is a study based on a sample of largely Catholic and Caucasian students, its findings are best generalized to a Catholic and Caucasian adolescent population and not to the entire adolescent population of the United States.

## **RESULTS**

### **BASIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SEXUALITY**

Students’ basic knowledge of sexual development, fertility, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) was inconsistent. Nearly all (97%) attributed adolescent interest in sexual activity to changing hormones. Responses about ovulation and female menstrual cycles varied considerably: a small percentage (14%) thought that female ovaries release millions of eggs each month; about half (49%) thought that female ovaries release two eggs each month, one from each ovary; and 14% did not know that females experience a normal monthly release of blood during menstrual periods. Over three-quarters (82%) knew that a female can be impregnated if sperm enter the vagina even if the

penis does not, but there was widespread confusion about when a female is actually fertile during her cycle. A large majority (91%) thought it is harmful to have intercourse with a partner who has a sexually transmitted disease (STD); 24% believed it is harmful for a female to have sexual intercourse during pregnancy.

Basic knowledge about contraceptives, as well as the failure rates and side effects of particular contraceptives was mixed. Close to two-thirds (62%) selected withdrawal as the least effective method of contraception, followed by the rhythm method (27%), condom use (21%), and the pill (8%). More than three-quarters (78%) knew that contraceptives can be purchased by people under 18 without parental consent. Knowledge about the transmission, symptoms, and prevention of STDs/HIV was also mixed. Almost one-fifth (18%) considered withdrawal the most effective prevention of STDs and less than half (43%) understood correctly that a negative HIV blood test does not eliminate the possibility that a person may be infected with the HIV virus. Almost all (95%), however, understood the value of condoms in preventing the transmission of STDs.

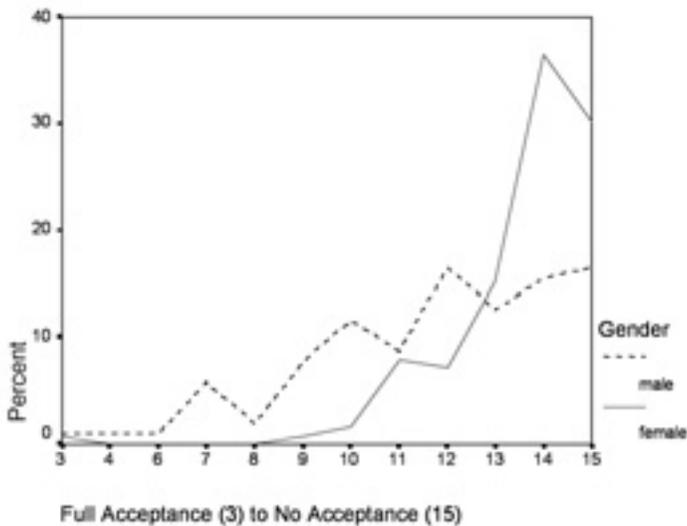
Knowledge about key areas of Catholic Church teachings with respect to love, chastity, and marriage was erratic. Almost two-thirds (63%) responded that love is a pleasurable feeling, two-thirds (67%) that it is wishing the best for another person, three-quarters (74%) that it is a serious friendship, and 17% that it is relating to another person because "it is good for me." The virtue of chastity was incorrectly understood by 58% as a prohibition of sex and correctly understood by 42% as helping people to love responsibly and to say no to inappropriate sex. Nearly all (97%) responded, in accordance with Catholic teaching, that marriage is a commitment of lifelong partnership and love, but about one-fifth (18%) asserted that marriage is an agreement to live together as long as both spouses are happy. Approximately 25% did not know the Catholic Church approves of Natural Family Planning (NFP), and just under half (45%) did not know that NFP involves abstaining from intercourse on certain days of a female's cycle. Most (72%) students viewed sexual intercourse as an expression of love and commitment and more than a physical activity; just under half (46%) reported it must be open to procreation, and 7% that it is only for having children.

## ATTITUDES

A large majority of students rejected traditional gender roles, but females were markedly less likely to accept stereotypical roles than males (see Figure 1). Almost three-fourths (73%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that people should not behave in certain ways because they are male or female, 87% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that males should not hold jobs traditionally held by females, and 89% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that females should not hold jobs traditionally held by males. Seventy-one percent judged artificial birth

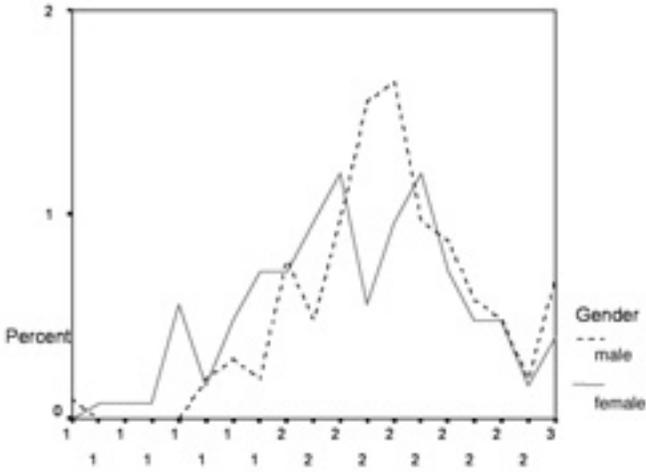
control to be acceptable for people having sex who are not ready for a child, and about the same percentage (70%) *agreed* that if a married couple is not ready for a child they should use NFP. More than half (53%) *agreed* it is acceptable for married couples to use artificial birth control. About one-third (34%) thought masturbation was sinful, 31% that it was morally neutral, and 35% that it was not sinful. Less than half (43%) *agreed* that people “should not have sex” before marriage, and 66% *agreed* that “sexual activity” outside of marriage is sinful. A large minority (39%) *agreed* that people have control over their sexual orientation, but 47% *did not agree* that it is sinful to feel attracted to someone of the same sex. Less than one-quarter (22%) thought it is sinful to be a homosexual even without engaging in homosexual activity, and 22% thought that homosexuals cannot belong to the Catholic Church.

Figure 1: Acceptance of Gender Roles



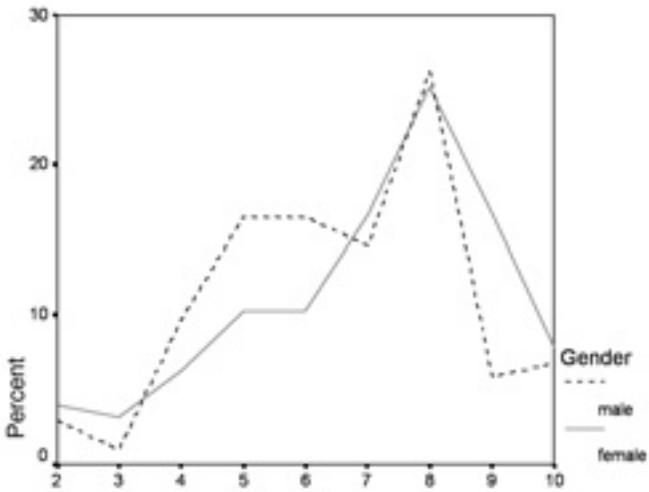
Students' level of self-esteem ranged from moderate to high, and their sense of belonging to church or school was relatively high. Seventy-eight percent reported they were satisfied with themselves, 83% felt a part of their school community, and 64% felt a part of their church community. A majority (66%) said they had a clear picture of their long-term goals and 69% felt sure of their personal sexual values and beliefs. Nearly all (96%) planned to go to college and 90% planned to get married. Males had slightly higher levels of self-esteem, slightly less clarity of long-term goals, and somewhat greater clarity about personal sexual values (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

Figure 2: Level of Self-Esteem



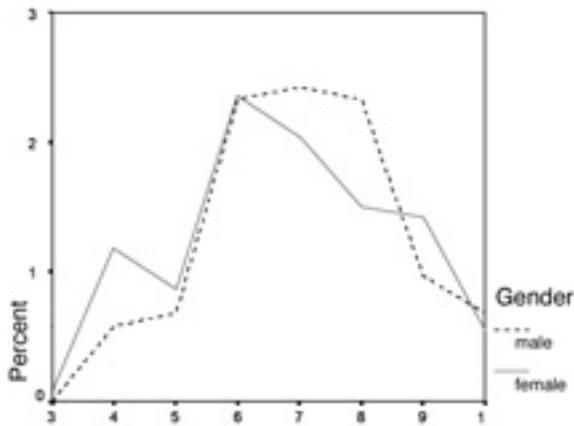
No clarity (0) to high clarity (30)

Figure 3: Clarity of Long-Term Goals



No clarity (0) to high clarity (30)

Figure 4: Clarity of Personal Sexual Values



## VALUES

Although 43% of the students agreed that sexual intercourse before marriage was wrong, nearly three-quarters (72%) indicated they would have intercourse if involved in a serious relationship, 76% if engaged, and less than one-quarter (22%) only if married. When asked about the importance of Catholic teachings to their understanding of moral right and wrong, 63% indicated Church teachings were *fairly* or *very important* to their moral understanding, and the same percentage accepted most or all Church teachings. When asked whether or not their parents shared parental values about sexuality with them, 60% reported their mothers had shared their values about sexuality, but only 35% reported their fathers had shared theirs. When asked how much particular persons influenced their values on sexuality, peers were reported to be *very influential* by 75%, parents by 62%, siblings by 37%, clergy by 18%, and teachers by 12%.

## SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Students reported they first learned about sex from a variety of sources. Over one-third (38%) learned about it from friends, 20% from parents, 16% from television or movies, and 13% from a sexuality education course. The majority of students who had a sexuality education class reported the following areas were discussed: abortion, AIDS/HIV, birth control, Church teachings about sexuality, dating, anatomy, marriage, reproduction, sexuality in general, sexual abstinence, and STDs. A significant percentage of students reported

they did not have a sexuality education class that discussed vaginal sex (25%), oral sex (45%), homosexuality (29%), masturbation (34%), or pornography (36%). It should be noted there were no significant differences between students who had and those who had not had sexuality education terms of behaviors, values, or attitudes.

When asked to rank the helpfulness of their sexuality education, responses ranged from *very helpful* to *not helpful*; a slight majority (56%) reported they found it *helpful*. When asked how well their sexuality education classes were taught, responses ranged from *very poor* to *very well*; the majority (54%) were in the middle. Students were about evenly split in response to the statement "I am glad I took a sex education class." When asked whether sexuality education influenced their attitudes about premarital sex, less than half (43%) reported that it had. Of these, 91% reported that it influenced their attitudes about the meaning of sex in a relationship, 86% that it influenced their attitudes about sexual behavior, and about 50% that it influenced their decision to abstain from sex until marriage.

Students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: what should be included in and excluded from sex education classes? Many indicated they wanted "everything" included and "nothing" excluded. Other responses suggested topics to be included: birth control, STDs and AIDS, consequences of sexual activity, dating, gender expectations, unplanned pregnancy issues, and homosexuality. Suggested for exclusion were discussions about personal sexual activity and the understanding that "sex is always wrong."

## **FAMILY AND PEERS**

To uncover possible family of origin and peer influences, students were asked about their parents, siblings, and peers. Almost half reported they considered their mother a friend *always* (47%) or *sometimes* (47%), and their father a friend *always* (43%) or *sometimes* (48%). A large majority reported that even when they disagreed with their mother (88%) or father (80%), they believed she or he wanted what was best for them. Belief that siblings, brothers (59%) and sisters (68%), wanted the best for them was considerably lower. When asked how often sexual issues were discussed with family members, 34% of those with sisters reported they *often* discussed sexual issues with them. Discussion of sexual issues *rarely* or *never* occurred with their fathers (89%) or mothers (72%). Little difference was found in the sexual activity of students who did and did not discuss sexual issues with their parents.

## **ACTIVITIES AND BEHAVIORS**

Students reported involvement in a variety of activities and behaviors. Over half (57%) reported they attended church weekly, and 53% reported they were involved in church activities. They reported they watched an average of 2

hours of television a day, and 78% used the Internet (average 3 hours per week). Over half (51%) reported they had visited a sex “chat room,” but 75% of these had done so only once. Nearly half (46%) reported they were currently in a dating relationship, and 85% had previously been in a dating relationship. The age at which the relationship began ranged from 10 to 18 years (average 15.5).

There was great variation in students’ sexual behaviors. A large majority (87%) reported they had kissed or made out for a long time, and 78% touched the sex organs of a person of the opposite sex. Males were more likely to have touched the sex organs of a female. A majority (55%) reported they had oral sex, 42% vaginal sex, and 41% had masturbated. Only 29% reported they had never had either oral or vaginal sex, and had never masturbated. The average age at first intercourse was 16, which reflects the national trend (Abma, Chandra, Mosher, Peterson, & Piccinio, 1997; Abma & Sonenstein, 2001; Meier, 2001; Newcomer & Baldwin, 1992; Singh & Darroch, 1999). Of those who reported having had vaginal intercourse, only 31% reported having used a condom every time. Females reported they had oral sex more often and vaginal sexual intercourse less often than males, and they had masturbated less than males (See Figures 5, 6, 7). Nearly all males and 40% of females reported they had read pornographic materials. Urban students were more likely than rural students to report having had oral sex, but somewhat less likely to report having had vaginal sex. This reflects national statistics (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001).

Figure 5: Oral Sexual Intercourse

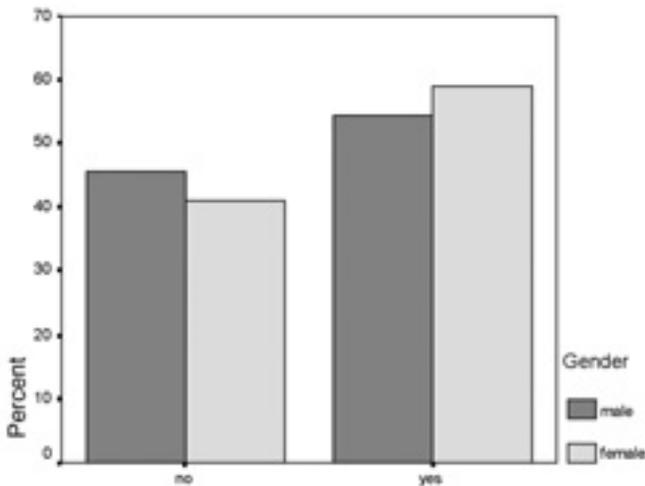


Figure 6: Vaginal Sexual Intercourse

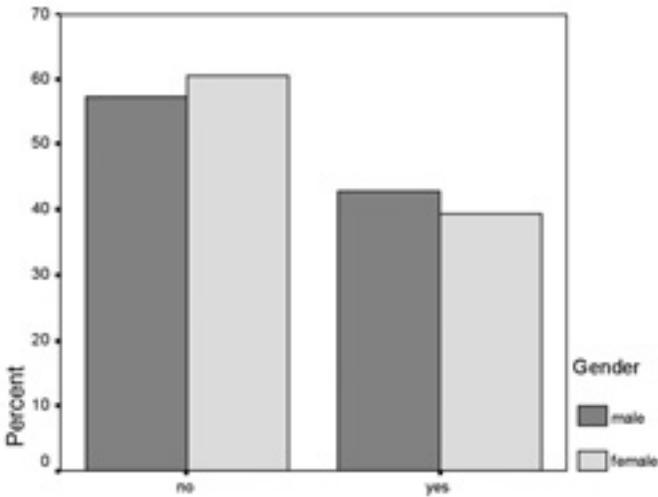
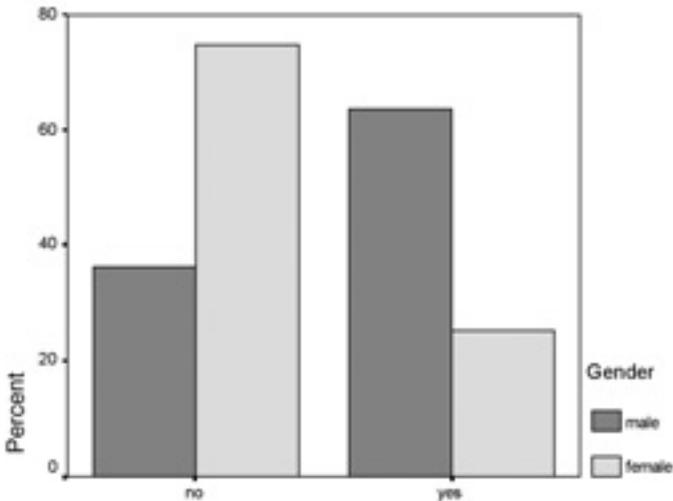


Figure 7: Masturbated



An important finding of this study is that greater religiosity, which in this study includes attachment to church, attendance at church, and acceptance of Church teachings, was correlated to a high statistical degree of respondents experiencing little or no sexual activity. Students who reported greater attachment to church, church attendance, and acceptance of church teachings also

reported fewer and less frequent sexual activities. This is consistent with previous research (Abma & Sonenstein, 2001; Meier, 2001; Miller & Moore, 1990; Plotnick, 1992; Thornton & Camburn, 1989; Werner-Wilson, 1998).

## DISCUSSION

Results indicate that a large number of students lacked basic knowledge about male and female physical development, reproduction, and fertility. Although the majority related the use of condoms to the prevention of STDs, they appeared to know little about STDs and HIV, and 31% never used a condom when they had sexual intercourse. This is particularly noteworthy given sustained nationwide efforts to provide accurate information to the entire population about "safe-sex," HIV, and STDs. Misunderstanding of Catholic teachings about sexuality, however, and attitudes and behaviors seriously contrary to those teachings, might not have been expected since the vast majority of students were in Catholic education. Attitudes toward pre-marital intercourse, contraception, and sexual behaviors, like vaginal intercourse, oral intercourse, and masturbation, were more in line with national trends in America than with Catholic Church teachings. Students' attitudes are often contrary to the teaching of the Church but in line with the attitude of the same majority of contemporary Catholic adults (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Wallace, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997; Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976).

A major strength of this study is that respondents indicated exactly what they judged their needs to be. The findings of this study show clearly that adolescents want to know and understand "everything" about sexuality. Their evaluation of the sexuality education they had was mixed, which could be a reflection of the quality of their teachers, of the programs offered, or simply of their own perceptions. What is included in sexuality education needs to be expanded as students grow physically, emotionally, and socially. Adolescents, as they mature, appear to need more, not less, sexuality education. The overwhelming majority who responded to the open-ended questions about what should be included or excluded from sexuality education indicated that "everything" should be included and "nothing" should be excluded. Given the society in which we live, and the availability of good and bad sexual information from a wide variety of sources, this is good advice. Ignorance is not the answer, but information alone is not enough (Whitehead, 1994). Concerted support from parents, Church, teachers, and the wider community is also required. Most sexuality curricula address topics that are judged least objectionable, but do not necessarily include those judged most important (Algozzine, Berne, & Huberman, 1995). What is essential to Catholic sexuality education is a dialogue between schools and parents on the collective needs of students, the expectations of parents, and the role of the school.

Substantial research finds a causal relationship between attitudes, values, and behavior (Bumpass, 2000; Clarkberg, 2000; Meier, 2001; Moors, 2000). Values can affect behavior, that is, individuals engage in a particular behavior as motivated by their values. Behavior can also affect subsequent values, that is, behavior causes the individual to adopt or change her or his values. Attitudes can be conceptualized in the same way. In light of this causal and reciprocal relationship, it seems that Catholic sexuality education, provided over the course of elementary and secondary schooling, has an exceptional opportunity to influence attitudes, values, and behaviors. Perhaps, what is most needed is sexuality education and church activities that nurture students' moral imagination, that is, educational activities that allow students to reflectively associate their experiences with concrete information and their developing attitudes and values (Craig, 1993). The more a student's experiences and moral imagination are allowed to interface with truthful sexual information, the more comprehensive his or her approach to sexual matters will be. This also brings into focus the positive correlation between religiosity, which involves more than church attendance, and less sexual activity. If churches truly wish to influence the sexual behavior of adolescents, they must offer them not only quality sexuality education programs but also educational experiences that bind them to church beyond mere weekend attendance.

Students' attitudes toward sexuality appear to be influenced by both current societal norms and Church teachings. That female students, far more than male students, rejected traditional gender roles reflects general attitudes among American women and men. Females were somewhat clearer than males about long-term goals. Students' attitudes toward masturbation, homosexuality, and premarital sex ranged from very accepting to very non-accepting, but a large number of students were neutral toward these issues. These results may indicate that students are uncertain, currently processing information, or forming their attitudes about these particular areas.

There is good news for parents in the findings of this study. Though there was little difference in the sexual activities of students who did and did not discuss sexual issues with their parents, 62% reported their parents influenced their sexual values, much more than clergy (18%), teachers (12%), school counselors (8%), and youth directors (7%). This finding suggests that parishes and schools might profitably make every effort to train and empower parents to talk to their children about sexual issues. Strengthening collaborative efforts between parents, church, and educators might, in fact, have more effect than efforts with children alone (Baldwin & Bauer, 1994; Croft & Asmussen, 1992; Leming, 1993; Werner-Wilson, 1998; Wilson, 1994). In light of these findings, the diocese that commissioned this study has inaugurated a program for parents that is already showing promising results.

Although the responses of a majority of students in this study appear to indicate a positive perception of family relations, especially those with mothers and

sisters, an even larger majority reported they rarely or never discussed sexuality with either parent. This has been found in previous research (King & Lorusso, 1997). This apparent contradiction highlights adolescents' reluctance to talk about sex with their parents; they are more likely to learn about and to discuss sexual issues with non-family members, especially peers (Fromme & Emihovich, 1998). Parents and educators who want to talk to teens about sexual issues themselves need education in both the knowledge and the skills required for open, honest, and fully informed discussion of sexual issues.

Students' responses to questions about the helpfulness of their sexuality education, how well it was taught, and whether or not they were glad they had it suggest there is work to be done in the area of teacher preparation. Preparation of sexuality educators is a pivotal factor for sexuality education, which is generally understood as an independent specialty that incorporates aspects of other specialties (Colby & Damon, 1993; Moglia, 1990; Nucci, 2001). Teachers must be well qualified to teach the range of information they deal with, as well as be thoroughly comfortable with and committed to their task. The Catholic bishops of the United States state without equivocation that "not everyone who is a competent teacher or catechist will be an effective sexuality educator" (USCC, 1997, p. 81). The selection of teachers for sexuality education must be done carefully, keeping in mind students' comments about no "old fogies." Experience and personal comfort with sexuality are as critical as educational diplomas.

As mentioned previously, research shows that comprehensive sexuality education does not encourage or increase adolescent sexual activity; knowledge and activity are never to be equated when it comes to sexuality. The present study finds that teens need and want more, not less, information and that a mix of sources (peers, family, school, Church, and the wider society) influence their developing sexual attitudes, values, and behaviors. From this it seems that families, churches, and schools should do their best to provide youth, in both grade and high schools, with information that is age appropriate and as accurate and comprehensive as is needed. Research indicates that sexuality education that combines the efforts of a number of sources (schools, peers, parents, community, and religious organizations) is most effective (Haffner, 1996; Kantor, 1994; Leming, 1993; Wilson, 1994). As the U.S. Catholic bishops assert, "the wider community, both civil and ecclesial, has a cooperative role to play in meeting the educational needs of these children of God, members of the human family" (USCC, 1997, p. 74).

## RECOMMENDATIONS BASED UPON STUDY FINDINGS

Needed are:

- Sexuality education programs that include accurate, comprehensive, and age appropriate information;
- Allied educational activities that nurture students' moral imagination and help bind them more closely to Church;
- Ongoing collaboration in sexuality education between parents, Church, and educators;
- Programs to train and empower parents to talk easily and accurately with their own children about sexual issues;
- Sexuality educators who are closer to the age of their students, well qualified, and capable of facilitating honest, candid discussion among adolescents;
- Sexuality education that explains Church teaching and distinguishes it from current social norms;
- Regular assessment and evaluation of sexuality education programs via survey of student participants.

In this age of technology and instant information, it is neither possible nor appropriate to wrap young people in a cocoon to protect them from what is judged wrong and unacceptable. The best protection that can be offered to them appears to be the advocacy of sound sexual information, values, and attitudes. At home, in school, and in church, youth need adult models of the values and attitudes they are expected to assimilate into their developing personhood. If they are to make informed moral decisions about sexuality, they must be equipped with the very best tools with which to make them. Only when parents, ministers, and teachers work together, and not at cross purposes, will Catholic teenagers acquire the tools they need to live chaste lives in contemporary America. Finally, like almost all things human, sexuality education is not a one-time event but a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes and values that create positive identity, relationships, and lifelong intimacy.

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