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Parents of Teens: Problem or Solution?

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Writing in USA Today, Laura Berman recently issued a call for children—especially teenagers—to receive “effective sex education.” Berman, director of the Berman Center, a woman's sexual health facility in Chicago, clearly sees parents as the problem in the delivery of what she conceives as “effective” sex education.

“What students need now is learning of another kind,” Berman explains, calling for “progressive sex education in schools.” She laments the “vacuum” of effective sex education in the public schools and offers targeted criticism at “those that teach abstinence only.”

Berman is a representative of the postmodern sex education industry. She wants children to be taught what is now known as “comprehensive sex education,” an approach that bombards children with early eroticism, premature sexualization, and advice on sexual technique and the latest contraceptive technologies.

Berman makes her argument with soothing language. “Though some parents are more proactive in their approach to sex education, they are the minority.” Of course, the article reveals that Berman's definition of a “good talk” about sex would involve encouraging kids to practice “safe sex” since they are going to be sexually active anyway.

Following the standard line put forward by proponents of comprehensive sex education, Berman insists that this is a health issue, not a matter of morality. “For the children whose parents are unwilling or unable to teach them about sex, the schools should be a backstop. Sex education is a public-health issue that should trump ‘conservative values’ and uninformed parents.”

Did you get that? Parents, who do not want their children to be presented with lessons on how to use a condom and engage in “safe” oral sex, are here described as “unwilling or unable” to teach their own children concerning matters of sex and sexuality.

Her argument is a breathtaking example of modern hubris. By redefining sex as “a public-health issue,” she can then go on to argue that concern for health “should trump ‘conservative values’ and uninformed parents.” Of course, by “uninformed” Berman refers to parents who reject the progressivist sex education agenda and its accompanying worldview.

“Not that there's anything wrong with conservative values,” Berman injects. “It's just that keeping kids in the dark is not the most effective way to keep them from having sex. Besides, talking to children about sex is not the same thing as giving them permission to have it.”

Are we supposed to be reassured by Ms. Berman's insistence that there is nothing wrong with conservative values?

Where would we get that impression? The entire structure of her argument is that these conservative values held by ignorant parents are grounded in backwardness, sexual naivete, and repressive views of sex.

Adolescent culture is “laced with sexuality,” Berman instructs. As she explains: “Teenage girls run around in halter tops and miniskirts with the words ‘juicy’ on their behinds. Oral-sex parties have replaced Spin the Bottle in some circles, with kids believing in the Clintonian truism that ‘oral sex is not sex.’ And then there is the teen subculture of instant messaging—in which sexual innuendo and invitations fly back and forth.”

Berman’s answer to this crisis is for schools to provide “proactive, continuing sex education programs that start early and continue throughout high school.” Standing in the way of her vision is President George W. Bush, criticized for his decision “to double federal funding of abstinence-based programs,” and America’s parents, who just won’t go along with sexualizing their own children. Ms. Berman and her article offer parents valuable knowledge about what we are up against.

Then again, parents are sometimes the problem. The September 14, 2004 edition of *The Wall Street Journal* featured a headline story declaring, “To Keep Teens Safe, Some Parents Allow Drinking at Home.” According to the story, controversy has erupted in West Warwick, Rhode Island when William and Patricia Anderson decided to allow their son Gregg and his teenage friends to hold an “all-night beer blast” at their home, rather than in a hotel or other facility.

As the article relates, the Andersons made this decision after learning that Gregg, a student athlete, told his parents that he and his friends were planning a drinking party to follow their high school’s prom.

As Gregg told the reporter, he started drinking while in the ninth grade, but told his parents at age sixteen and a high school junior that he had taken up drinking. “When I was a junior, I said to my mom, ‘Hey, we really don’t have any place to go. Do you mind if we have a few drinks here?’” Deciding that the kids were safer drinking in their home than anywhere else, the Andersons began to allow Gregg to invite some friends over on Friday nights for games and beer.

Anticipating the prom night, the Andersons allowed Gregg to invite some friends to spend the night in the back yard, pitching tents and restricted in their ability to leave the property. Others provided two kegs of beer, and soon the party began. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, “Roughly 35 kids showed up. Some performed ‘keg stands,’ variations on handstands that involve holding beer guzzlers upside-down by their feet so they can suck beer directly from keg caps. Others downed beer from a 16-inch ‘yard glass’ which holds about 24 ounces.”

One thing led to another, and by 4:30 a.m., neighbors began to complain about the noise, and police were called. According to the report, of the approximately 35 kids present at the party, “most, if not all, were under the legal drinking age of 21.” About a dozen were under 18, “including one very drunk 16-year-old girl.” The minors were required to leave, even if the others were permitted to stay.

Just a few days later, the police visited William Anderson and arrested him for violating a law prohibiting the procuring of alcohol for minors. Anderson, who had told police in advance about the party, was later released after he was fingerprinted and photographed.

The entire episode has led to controversy in Rhode Island and beyond. Amazingly enough, some parents are willing to become the facilitators of their own kids’ drinking—even going so far as to allow drinking in the home, drinking parties in the yard, all the while arguing that their purpose is to keep their teens “safe.”

The Andersons are not alone. Marilyn Pandora, whose son Steve attended the Andersons’ party, said that Gregg’s parents “were only trying to keep things safe.” Later, she expanded on the reasons for her support: “My son had really struggled in high school and I had promised him that when he graduated he could have a party. Once, he asked me, ‘Can we drink at the party?’ I said, ‘Hell, yeah—and we’ll do shots to everyone who ever said you wouldn’t graduate.’”

Rowena Zabrodsky said she was shocked when she heard that teenagers in the area were emptying their water bottles and filling them with vodka so they could drink without notice. The mother of two daughters, Zabrodsky explained the foundation of her own permissive approach. “The forbidden fruit only becomes more attractive.” Like the Andersons, Mrs. Zabrodsky began to allow the drinking in her own home, accusing other parents of being hypocritical.

Eventually, the controversy over the West Warwick incident led to attention at the state level. The Rhode Island attorney general's office drafted legislation that would criminalize any facilitation of underage drinking. As The Wall Street Journal explained, "In all 50 states it is illegal to furnish alcohol to minors, and most states have 'social host' laws allowing civil lawsuits against adults who provide alcohol to youths." Nevertheless, "Only about 14 states, including Florida, Ohio and New Jersey, have laws that make it a crime for an adult to allow underage drinkers to imbibe in their homes."

The legislation was eventually watered down, only to die when the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups protested the proposal.

Reflecting on their decision and the ensuing controversy, William and Patricia Anderson told the Journal they have no regrets. "We have two older sons who have been through this. We knew what we really ought to be looking out for and what we should try to stop. Kids will do stupid things, but you don't want them to get killed while doing it," Mr. Anderson explained.

The logic of the Andersons' position makes sense only in a world in which children—including young teenagers—are considered to be morally autonomous and beyond the reach of parental oversight and discipline. These parents are not parenting in any genuine sense; they are merely serving as the facilitators, organizers, and administrators of their adolescents' misbehavior.

While some of the parents indicated concern about drunk driving, where is the concern about drunkenness, alcohol poisoning, and the inevitable damage that comes to adolescents who drink?

In reality, William and Patricia Anderson—along with the others who share their parenting philosophy—are applying to the question of alcohol the very approach commended by Laura Berman when it comes to sex. Even if backward parents, comfortable in ignorance and repression, would rather our kids not have sex and attend "keg parties," we are told that our kids are going to do these things anyway.

This is absolute nonsense! So long as our kids live in our homes, under our authority, we have not only the right but also the responsibility to make certain that they lack the opportunity, much less the encouragement, to engage in such behavior.

Parents who allow or facilitate the sin of their own children bring responsibility for that sin upon themselves. There is no such thing as "safe sin," and this kind of parenting will lead only to a harvest of shame.

