

“That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require schools to provide certain additional sex education to girls aged between 13 and 16; to provide that such education must include information and advice on the benefits of abstinence from sexual activity; and for connected purposes.”

A year ago, almost to the day, Broadcaster Dame Joan Bakewell said that Mary Whitehouse (the campaigner against declining moral standards on television) was right to fear that sexual liberation in the 1960s would damage society.

Dame Joan was a long-time opponent of Mary Whitehouse but said she had now changed her mind, saying that the freedom granted by the introduction of the Pill had been abused, resulting in the sexualisation of young girls and the prevalence of pornography.

Writing in the *Radio Times*, Dame Joan said,

“The liberal mood back in the '60s was that sex was pleasurable and wholesome and shouldn't be seen as dirty and wicked.

“The Pill allowed women to make choices for themselves. Of course, that meant the risk of making the wrong choice. But we all hoped girls would grow to handle the new freedoms wisely.

“Then everything came to be about money – so now sex is about money, too. Why else sexualise the clothes of little girls, run TV channels of naked wives, have sex magazines edging out the serious stuff on newsagents’ shelves?”

She said that our society is saturated in sex: -

“A typical prime time hour contains 2.6 references to intercourse, 1.2 references to prostitution and rape, 4.7 sexual innuendos, 1.8 kisses and 1 suggestive gesture.

Not to mention internet, phones.”

Let’s look at some examples:

- 15th April 2010: Padded bikinis for 7 year olds, see: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1265859/Primark-condemned-selling-padded-bikinis-7-year-olds.html>
- 5th March 2010: Explicit video shown to 7 year olds, see: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1255483/Parents-anger-class-seven-year-olds-shown-graphic-sex-cartoon-school.html>
- 12th July 2009: Sex every day keeps the doctor away, says the NHS sex education pamphlet to go into schools at secondary level: *For too long, say its authors, experts have concentrated on the need for “safe sex” and loving*

relationships while ignoring the main reason that many people have sex, that is, for enjoyment. Alongside the slogan "an orgasm a day keeps the doctor away", it says: "Health promotion experts advocate five portions of fruit and veg a day and 30 minutes' physical activity three times a week. What about sex or masturbation twice a week?"

See:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article6689953.ece>

We have to ask ourselves whether, in the midst of this kind of society, the current sex education programmes in our schools are working. We have to ask ourselves the honest question: has the principle of exposing our youth to sex or conceding that 'they're going to have sex any way so let's just keep it safe' worked?

It is often argued that compulsory sex education and effective teaching on "safe sex" will help tackle the high pregnancy rate amongst teenagers and underage children in the UK. Sadly, the evidence suggests that knowledge about the availability of contraception has not helped to reduce pregnancy rates. The British Medical Journal found that 93% of teenagers who became pregnant had seen a medical professional prior to the

pregnancy, and 71% had discussed contraception. The journal found that: *“teenagers who become pregnant have higher consultation rates than peers and most of the difference is owing to consultation on contraception”*.¹ According to data published by the Office for National Statistics in 2007 (reported in an article by the BBC) Britain has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe. The data shows there were 41.9 conceptions per 1,000 15 to 17 year olds. The under 16 conception rate was found to be 8.3 per 1,000. In total, there were estimated to be just over 42,900 conceptions in under 18s, and nearly 8,200 pregnancies in under 16’s in 2007. ²

The government’s aim has been to halve teenage pregnancy rates by 2010. However, data by the Office for National Statistics, published in the Guardian newspaper, demonstrated that teenage pregnancies had dropped only by 13% from 2007 to 2010 – far from the 50% target.³

This is why I am bringing this Bill today. I believe that the answer to ending our constant struggle with the incredibly high

¹ D, Churchill, J Allen, M Pringle, “Consultation patters and provisions for contraception in general practice before teenage pregnancy BMJ 2000 321: 486-489 cited by the Family Education Trust in their leaflet “Too much too soon”

² BBC News Online – *“Teen pregnancy rates go back up”* 26 February 2009
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7911684.stm>

³ Guardian Newspaper Online *“Teenage pregnancy rates fall but not far enough”* Wednesday 24 February 2010
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/feb/24/teenage-pregnancy-rates-2008>

rate of teenage sexual activity and underage pregnancies lies in teaching our girls and boys about the option of abstinence from sex as part of their compulsory education at school.

We have to thoroughly re-examine the content of sex education provided in schools and consider whether what is currently being offered, is in the best interests of our children and society as a whole? For instance, children learn about puberty and intercourse from the age of 7, and about pregnancy and contraception from the age of 11. At none of these stages does the curriculum cover teachings about emotions, relationships and the option to say “no” to sex. Children are taught how to have “safe sex” but are not taught how to say no to a boyfriend who persists on a sexual relationship. In a letter to the *Daily Mail*, 14-year-old Josie Parkinson described the sex education she had been receiving at her local secondary school as follows:

“As a 14 year-old girl, I have had to attend four talks in the past nine months from a woman from a family planning clinic. I have been taught three times how to put on a condom; how easily pupils can acquire condoms free at a clinic; how to recognise sexually transmitted diseases and have them treated confidentially at a clinic; and that we do not need to tell our parents, GP, the police or anyone else in authority about being

provided with contraception, or even having an abortion. There was not one mention of abstaining or any discouragement of sex.

“At the first lesson we were told: ‘As you know, it is unlawful for a girl or boy to have sex before 16. However, if you are under 16, we can still provide you with contraception and you do not need to tell your parents about it.’⁴

One fact which is constantly ignored by society is that peer pressure is a key contributor to early sexual activity amongst the children in our country. Society is focused on sex; our sex education teaches children how to have sex not how to say no to it. We ignore, at our peril, that many boys and girls feel pressured into having intercourse when actually they need to be given their childhood back.

In our sex education programmes we need to promote the notion of abstinence and all the advantages that it brings- self-respect, no relational mistakes, no sexual disease, no unplanned pregnancies. It needs to be seen as a real alternative to ‘safe sex’ options. We need to be teaching our children to wait – or at least promoting this as a viable and real

⁴The Too-much-too-soon leaflet published by the Family Education Trust.
<http://www.famyouth.org.uk/publications/too-much-too-soon.pdf>

option. Until the notion of abstinence becomes more normalised in our schools nothing will change.

It is deeply ironic that a school in Horsham in Sussex put Lydia Playfoot in isolation when she refused to take off a purity ring (which she'd worn for 3 years as a sign of her desire to wait until marriage before having sexual intercourse); and yet was dealing with teenage pregnancies, abortions and giving out the morning after pill. Isn't there some wrong messaging there?

The goal of sex education is commonly defined as providing young people with information so that they are effectively equipped to make "informed choices" as to whether or not to engage in sexual activity. However, "informed choice" as defined by educators is really no choice at all: it is all about whether to have sex, or not, based on "feelings" and "wishes", with no regard to the moral and health implications of this decision.

In some ways teenagers are young adults; in others they are still our children worthy of our protection. Most teenagers will simply have no idea whether they are ready for sex based on their feelings. This is where, as a responsible society, we need to give our teenagers real options; real ways of saying 'no', of

countering the peer pressure and the heavy sexualisation of society.

Surely it is not simply about 'informed choice based on feelings'; we should be aiming to empower our teenagers to make wise, moral and lawful choices and there is certainly no evidence that contraceptive based sex-education prevalent in the UK is achieving that – so let's do something about it.

Aside from the social implications, there are of course, significant health risks associated with having sex too soon. Teenage sex increases the likelihood of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Chlamydia (which significantly increases the possibility of infertility) is on the rise amongst the young and critically under detected. Lessons on contraception at school usually give the false impression that those who use protection are completely secure from the risk of contracting any disease. However, contraception does not prevent disease– the emphasis that is placed on this fact by educators is too little.

A consequence of early sex is unplanned pregnancies and abortion. The long term impact of abortion on a woman's life is not addressed in school; nor the impact of continuing with a teenage pregnancy. Statistics show that the health risks

associated with giving birth at an early age are profound for both the mother and the child with infant and maternal mortality rates considerably higher than those related to mothers in their twenties.⁵

As well as the health risks already mentioned, we do not talk in our sex education programmes of the severe financial consequences associated with early pregnancy. Teenagers who are expectant mothers are likely to have little resources to raise the child, owing to their age. Pregnant teenagers are also more likely to stop further education, which will undoubtedly affect their earning capacity in the future and lead to greater poverty. Financial struggles may also result from the fact that teenage mothers are more likely to be single parents.

A Big Society will cherish the young and give them tools to grow into adulthood appropriately; such a society will teach children how to resist premature sexualisation; such a society will teach our boys and girls that sexual intercourse is intimate, precious and worth waiting for – not a cultural pastime or something that happens at teenage parties at the weekend.

⁵ The Family Policy Social Centre UK, Article – Teenage Pregnancies
<http://www.fpssc.org.uk/teenage-pregnancy/>

Study after study shows the great benefit of marriage. Wouldn't it be counter-cultural but wholly edifying to have as an option in the sex education programme the idea that our young people might want to keep themselves pure until marriage just like Lydia Playfoot; and for that position to be seen as a real alternative and not silenced and punished as in her case.

The children are our future; we need to invest in them; we need to give them the ability to say no for the sake of their future.