

“No Sex Please, We’re Teenagers”

Abstinence Education is being rebranded and a new breed of young adults is being born. Sue Relf explains the work and ethos of Challenge Team UK.

Until ten years ago STIs were not an issue for teens at school. Now, sexually transmitted infections are a real threat to their health. The two that are most common, human papilloma virus and chlamydia, can silently cause irreparable damage to the female reproductive organs. Within three years of first sex one in two sexually active people will be infected with HPV. This is not as drastic as it sounds, as many strains are benign, but it is nevertheless a frightening statistic. A vaccine against the main cancer causing strains has been rolled out. One in nine or ten sexually active young people are infected with chlamydia, according to latest estimates. Condoms have little effectiveness against HPV and only 60% protection against chlamydia, at the best guess. The government recognises that this public health problem is an ‘epidemic’.

Everyone knows that there is a guaranteed way of avoiding any of the problems associated with early sexual activity, including teenage pregnancy. Stating the obvious in an unequivocal way is neatly summed up as ‘Just say no’ or ‘abstinence education’. Both terms have derogatory connotations and, according to official sources, ‘do not work’. But, incontrovertibly, ‘saying no’ is fail-safe. How might schools provide sex and relationships education that presents ‘saying no’ as a lifestyle that has considerable attractiveness for the forward thinking? How might schools help students ‘say no’ by empowering them to believe that they can?

Knowing that ‘abstinence education’ needs rebranding, Challenge Team UK is one initiative amongst several that have emerged from the voluntary and charity sector in the past few years. A ‘Challenge Team’ comprises four or five young adult presenters who have decided that they will save sex for marriage. The team, which comprises young adults of both sexes, tell their audiences why they think and behave as they do. Sexuality is a good thing. Sexual feelings are a good thing. Sex is a good thing; so good that it is something to be highly valued and respected. Sex is powerful and accompanied by strong emotions and passions. Because it is so powerful it can be damaging. It can be saved. The hour long interactive, magazine style presentation has pupils sitting on the edge of their seats. The presentation is fast moving, concentrated and interlaced with plenty of humour. There is no hint of preaching or moralising and no religious references. The frankness and honesty of the team members astonishes audiences. Their sincerity moves them. The terminology used is always respectful. No-one is embarrassed. Those who have had sex already can make a new start if they want to. The dangers of too much alcohol are highlighted. There is relationships education as well as sex education. Friendship is talked up. ‘Love is a devotion whereas infatuation is an emotion’. Sex can have emotional as well as physical fall out. ‘Saving sex’ is not presented as an easy choice, but the many advantages are listed. Sex is worth waiting for. It is SRE delivered in a way that students have never seen before.

Challenge Team UK recruits and trains young adult volunteers who then tour the country. Each school pays £175 per visit. Presentations are made to year groups from Year 9 to sixth form

A Manchester comprehensive school teacher wrote, 'I thoroughly enjoyed the presentation and found it both informative and entertaining. I was slightly concerned about the reaction of pupils who live with parents who are in committed relationships but have not married - having talked to such pupils afterwards however, this was not a problem at all. My two colleagues were also very positive about the presentation. I have talked to a number of pupils, both girls and boys, and the feedback was very positive. They responded particularly well to the presentation coming from young people.'

A teacher at a Liverpool comprehensive wrote, 'The presentation was wonderful, witty, challenging, honest and straightforward. I have recommended the Team to two other schools. Do I get commission?'

Another teacher wrote, 'This was an excellent presentation. The presenters promoted clear messages in an informative and entertaining way. The students enjoyed the performance and appreciated the high level of humour. Many students found that their attitudes to the subject were changed by the issues raised and their knowledge improved, eg. contraception, STIs.'

Almost 100% of schools ask for a return visit. The response from pupils is universally favourable. 'It told the truth' was one comment. Other pupils have responded, 'Boss!', 'It was cool!', 'It made you think.'

One pupil from Birmingham wrote, 'Dear Challenge Team UK, I am just emailing to say thank you. You did a presentation at my school and I am very grateful that you did. It felt like everyone around me did have boyfriends and were doing stuff that I hadn't. I felt really pressured and like an outcast. After your performance I realised that that wasn't true and I'm very grateful to you for making me realise it. I think that your performances are fantastic and I really admire you for doing it ... I'm going to save sex for marriage and because of you I bet many others like me will to (sic).'

While wanting to inform students about the risks of early sex, Challenge Team also aims to raise their aspirations. Marriage is presented as the place where sex is most safely experienced. Almost all teens say that they hope to be married one day, whether they belong to single parent families, re-ordered families or live with both their birth parents. Hardly any teens think that marriage is old fashioned or out of date. Challenge Team UK made the difficult decision not to use the term 'long term committed relationship' as interchangeable with marriage. If most young people hope to be married, then why not affirm their aspirations and help them to fulfil them? 'Long-term committed relationship', while sometimes virtually the same as marriage, in the majority of cases is not. Research is now showing that co-habitation has become an 'intense form of dating' because so many of such couples split up. Half of all co-habiting unions end within a year. There is a misconception that relationships can be 'test-driven' by living together first. Of course there are couples who live together and stay together. Apparently though, marriages that are not preceded by cohabitation have the best chance of being long-lived, especially those where sex has been saved for marriage. Every sexual partner before marriage and outside it can only threaten its cohesion and ability to withstand stresses. Its public nature, wider family support, planned commitment and legal status give it the best chance of stability and longevity. 'All you need is love' needs unpacking and explaining.

Young people who are lesbian or gay can also be inspired to save sex and 'wait'. If they wish to enter into a civil partnership this option is open to them. Saving sex gives adolescents who may be confused about their sexuality time to mature before deciding whether they are 'gay' or 'straight'.

Idealism? Cloud cuckoo land? Challenge Team UK believes that teens can be inspired. Those teens who instinctively feel that sex is sacred, or whose family or religious background supports saving sex for marriage are affirmed in their convictions. Those teens under 16, still in the majority, who have yet to become sexually active, are given food for thought and information to help them make one of the most important decisions of their lives. Those who have already engaged in sexual activity are made aware of the risks and are challenged to think again. If the onset of sex is delayed, even in a few, then some pregnancies, abortions and STIs will have been avoided and life chances improved. Challenge Team UK offers schools an alternative to the current cultural assumptions.

Sue Relf, Voluntary organiser

- Challenge Team is a registered charity and is non profit making.
- Challenge Team website - www.challengeteamuk.org
- To book a presentation email info@challengeteamuk.org
- To receive an information pack email info@challengeteamuk.org