

Culture of Life

March 7, 2008

Dr. Jennifer Roback-Morse is Research Fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and former Research Fellow at the Stanford University Hoover Institution. In an interview with Culture of Life Foundation, Dr. Morse discusses her research on abstinence education programs and what she calls "Comprehensive Abstinence Education".

- 1) CLF: Dr. Morse, you've done extensive research on the complexity of Abstinence. Some simply suggest that a "just say no" approach is all that is needed. Why do you believe we should take a more comprehensive approach to this issue?

JRM: The "Just say no" approach is not appealing. It is much more helpful to the young to explain what you favor. Just avoiding evil is not good enough. So we need to positively promote the "good" that abstinence is leading towards, not just prohibiting something. When we say no to premarital sex; we are saying yes to married love.

- 2) CLF: What is Comprehensive Abstinence Education?

JRM: I just invented the term "Comprehensive Abstinence Education" myself as a parallel to "Comprehensive Sex Education," which talks about the physiology of sex, and throws in abstinence as an afterthought. Many people who are pro-life in their views are disgusted with this approach because it sanctions sex out of marriage and does not give enough information about the relational good that are served by human sexuality. Abstinence educators are frustrated by the implied message that sex without a baby is an entitlement. I have recently encountered several different groups of pro-life young people. What jumped out at me was that these groups had a comprehensive approach to abstinence. They spent much more time talking about marriage than about sex. The point of abstinence is not simply to avoid sex. Instead, their approach is to get them focused on the future they will be creating with their spouse. Then, the young person starts to see that there is something worth sacrificing for and worth working for. This is a much more hopeful approach.

It used to be that society was oriented around the idea that sex and child-bearing belonged inside marriage. Society tried to prepare the young for that way of life. Today, society is oriented around the idea that sex is essentially a sterile activity, with babies thrown in as an after-thought, if you happen to like that sort of thing. Sex happens early, out of wedlock and is often predatory. At the same time, college-educated people are told that it is irresponsible to get married and start a family until you're almost thirty. So in a perverse, twisted sort of way, comprehensive sex education programs are preparing children for life in the society we've created around the idea of sterile sex. The Comprehensive Sex Educators have given up: they think they can't reasonably expect people to wait



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until they are married, so we better "protect" them. This is a message of despair. The pro-life message is hopeful. We give the young something positive worth working for, rather than giving them a flak jacket so they don't get caught in the crossfire.

- 3) CLF: Is there any data that supports your approach?

JRM: My approach hasn't been specifically tested. (I just invented it, after all!) But we do have a lot of suggestive indirect evidence. The data from sex education programs and abstinence education programs is all over the map because the educational programs themselves are all over the map. Programs called "abstinence only" can vary from comprehensive approaches that include information about preparing for marriage, to brief classroom talks. So it is hard to generalize.

We do know that good relationships between adults and children protect the young from early sexual activity. When both parents are present in home, and children trust the parents, the chance of early sexual involvement and pregnancy decreases. The programs that work best, whether they include contraception or not, are the programs that give the kids something else to do besides go home to an empty house after school. There are even some programs that succeed in reducing teen pregnancy, that don't talk about sex at all. Instead, these programs provide strong mentor relationships, leadership training and after school activities. In general, parental involvement and family structure are much more significant predictors of delayed sexual activity, for instance, than are school based programs.

- 4) CLF: Part of the Culture of Life mission is to understand the truth about the human person at all stages of life; I am wondering if you have any comments on how abstinence early in a person's life might impact their future life, relationships, or development?

JRM: Multiple sexual partners leads to depression for teenaged girls. Early initiation of sex leads to higher probability of a number of negative consequences: abortion, out of wedlock childbirth, poverty and even a lower probability of being happily married at age 30.

- 5) CLF: You mention in your work that in the area of sexual education, political battles are being fought that have implications not only for specific sexual behavior, but also for larger social issues, interpersonal relationships, and the very identity of our young people.

JRM: Every time the federal funding questions come up, people trot out different studies saying abstinence doesn't work. It is cherry picking because you can do the same for the sex education studies. School based sex education is not all that effective. There are people in our society who are deeply committed to the sexual revolution. They see married life as too risky and have given up on love. In a sense, the whole sexual revolution is a retreat from human relationships.

- 6) CLF: You suggest that "comprehensive abstinence education" might be more aptly termed "comprehensive marital education." Can you comment more on



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what you mean by this?

JRM: Comprehensive Marital Education helps people prepare for marriage, and to see that their sexual life is going to be most fruitful and satisfying in marriage. Social science has actually shown that married couples have the best sex. I love to tell college students that if they really want to have a great sex life, they should stop messing around, and get married. Over the course of a lifetime a couple builds up their sexual relationship. You can't give yourself to a person in a one night stand the way you can over the course of a lifetime. A married couple can come to satisfy each other in a much deeper way than is possible in a brief relationship, where there is always fear of rejection. Comprehensive Marital Education should also cultivate realistic expectations about marriage. People sometimes go into marriage thinking that I am always going to like the way I feel, or that I am going to get my spouse to do what I want. Not only is this unrealistic, it is not respectful of the other person who is seen as an object whose goal is to pleasure you. This is backwards. We are not supposed to use each other, but to give ourselves generously to each other. I actually have a booklet called "101 Tips for a Happier Marriage: You can Improve your marriage, even if your spouse doesn't change a bit!" Almost all marriages can be improved. Many marriages can be preserved even if one has a difficult spouse. You can learn more at my website: <http://www.jennifer-roback-morse.com>. Marriage is a central part of the pro-life message. As a result of abortion and contraception, people believe sex is essentially a sterile recreational activity. If you wake up pregnant, they think, "No way can I have a baby with this person." So their next move is to have an abortion.

There is something seriously strange about a society that can't bring itself to tell 14 year olds to postpone sex, but tells educated women to postpone marriage until they are nearly menopausal. We have many well-educated and ambitious women who postpone marriage and pregnancy until it is too close to too late. Some women decide to have children alone because they discern, sometimes correctly, that they have waited so long they will not be married in time to have children. This has negative consequences for the child who grows up without a father.

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