

Contraceptive Controversy

Jeremy and Ayla are involved with the Parent Teacher Association at Heritage High School, where both of their children attend. In the most recent meeting of the PTA, a major topic of discussion was a student at Heritage who had gotten pregnant. In discussing how to prevent teenage pregnancies in the future, a number of suggestions were made. There was a clear push to better educate students about contraceptive measures and to move away from abstinence-only education in their health classes. One parent suggested that they should start giving out condoms for free in the school bathrooms, as many university campuses do.

On the drive home, Jeremy and Ayla continue to discuss their daughter's classmate's pregnancy, and the PTA's suggestions. Ayla dislikes the shame that the pregnant student faced at school and thought that giving out condoms in bathrooms was a good way to destigmatize sex and make students feel more comfortable asking questions about it. Remembering her friends' stories from high school, Ayla reasons that there is no way to prevent teenagers from having sex altogether, and that the best thing to do is to ensure that they are doing so safely, so as to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Ayla thinks that offering condoms in bathrooms is a good way of making sure that contraceptives are accessible to all students, even those whose parents may not support other avenues of birth control. Additionally, it is a good way to educate about safe sex. Though she strongly dislikes the idea of either of her children having sex while in high school, the idea of either one of them getting pregnant or getting an STI as a result is a much scarier proposition for Ayla.

Jeremy disagrees, however, and thinks that giving out condoms encourages students to have sex, and would enable teenagers to have sex earlier than they otherwise might (or should). Jeremy and Ayla's daughter has just turned sixteen, and Jeremy doesn't like the idea that free condoms might be the thing that convinces her it is a good idea to start having sex. Jeremy, too, thinks back to his own experiences in high school, and remembers that for a lot of his peers, not having access to contraceptives did prevent them from having sex, or at least played a role in their decisions to wait. Making condoms available at school, Jeremy reasons, would make it easier for younger Heritage students to access them in a way that they couldn't before. Many juniors and seniors can drive themselves to a store to buy contraceptives, and have spending money from summer and seasonal jobs. Most freshmen and sophomores, on the other hand, have no way to purchase condoms without the help of someone older. The way Jeremy sees it, handing out condoms is exactly that. Jeremy supports better education in classrooms about various contraceptive methods, but feels that teenagers should still wait until adulthood to become sexually active. He thinks that the school has an obligation to do as much as they can to discourage students from having sex any sooner than that.

Much like the PTA as a whole, Jeremy and Ayla are not able to come to an agreement about whether it is a good idea for Heritage to start giving out condoms in the school bathrooms. As the car ride home comes to an end, they realize they'll have to spend a lot more time talking about the matter before the next PTA meeting.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When, if ever, is it appropriate for a school to implement policies that directly contradict the students' parents' values or preferences?
2. How much of the responsibility for educating teenagers about contraceptives and safe sex lies in the hands of schools, and how much lies in the hands of parents?
3. How, if at all, is the responsibility for a teenage pregnancy shared between multiple people, and who shares it?

