

Family Education Trust

(Family and Youth Concern)

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Government's teenage pregnancy strategy is based on ideology, not research

**Teenage conceptions rising fastest in areas where special programmes
to combat them have been implemented**

Recent figures which show teenage conceptions rising most rapidly in those areas where the government is targeting resources to reduce them are only to be expected, according to a new publication from Family & Youth Concern.

In spite of the government's commitment to halve under-18 conceptions by 2010, latest figures show a small (0.7%) increase between 2001 and 2002. But the increase is concentrated in areas where special programmes have been set up to address this particular issue: Oxfordshire saw a rise of 7.3%, Cornwall 16.4% and Torbay 22.4%.

According to Valerie Riches in her book *Sex Education or Indoctrination?*, this is because the government's approach to teenage sexual health is not based on research but on a deeply held ideology which sees the state as the parent of everyone's children.

The state as parent of everyone's children

In *Sex Education or Indoctrination?* she argues that sex education has never really been about preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, but about changing the shape of the family and increasing the role of the state. Those organisations which are key players in the field are shown to be linked by a shared ideology which takes the view that, in the words of Helen Brook, founder of the influential Brook organisation:

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‘It is now the privilege of the parental state to take major decisions – objective, unemotional, the state weighs up what is best for the child.’ (p.31)

Valerie Riches identifies the exclusion of parents, who act as buttresses protecting their children from exploitation, from the knowledge of what is happening to their children, as a key legal change campaigned for by sex educators and sexual health advocates. At the forefront of the international campaign is the International Planned Parenthood Federation, which promotes ‘freedom of sexual expression’ and ‘sexual pleasure as a valid sexual and reproductive health need for all young people’ (defining ‘young people’ as those aged 10-24) through its network of family planning associations (pp.21-22). It has even published material encouraging its member associations to break the laws of their own countries in pursuit of their goals – in spite of the fact that most of them are funded by those governments (p.15).

US government refuses to fund IPPF, but on 5 March 2004 Tony Blair’s government pledged to increase its support for IPPF from 4.5m to 6.0m a year to help make good the American shortfall.

Government support for the ideology of the IPPF, manifested in this country through its affiliate, the British Family Planning Association, as well as organisations such as Brook and the Sex Education Forum, is particularly strong. For this reason, public policy initiatives, such as the current teenage pregnancy strategy, focus on permissive sex education at earlier ages, coupled with the provision of contraception to teenagers, including underage girls, without the knowledge or consent of their parents. The fact that such policies have accompanied a rapid increase in the very problems they are designed to address is irrelevant, because:

‘This is an area in which the ideology trumps the research every time... there is no serious research, from anywhere in the world, to indicate that the sort of early, permissive sex education they [the Teenage Pregnancy Unit] advocate could ever reduce conception rates. But it has never really been about education. Sex education bears the same relation to education as voodoo bears to medicine, or astrology to astronomy. It rests on faith, not facts.’
(p.2)

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A phobia about abstinence

Similarly, the provision of contraception to teenagers is favoured, even though it is not necessarily associated with lower conception rates (p.47). Abstinence education, on the other hand, is ruled out of discussion altogether, in spite of the fact that abstinence programmes in the USA have accompanied a 19% fall in teenage conceptions during the 1990s (p.55).

‘The government’s teenage pregnancy strategy ... is based on the premise that it is unrealistic to expect young people to abstain from sexual activity. They have therefore chosen to embark on a damage limitation exercise dependent on condom usage... and the use of the morning-after pill as a back-up when all else fails. The truth is, however, that the vast majority of young people under the age of 16 are not engaged in sexual relationships... It might therefore be a wiser course of action to support and affirm the majority in their abstinence, and to demonstrate to the minority the physical, emotional and psychological benefits of delaying sexual activity until marriage... Until our sex educators overcome their phobia about abstinence and their obsession with sexual expression, they are unlikely to make any positive progress’ (pp.58-9).

“Sex Education or Indoctrination: How ideology has triumphed over facts” by Valerie Riches is published by Family & Youth Concern, Jubilee House, 19-21 High Street, Whitton, Twickenham, Middlesex TW2 7LB Tel 020 8894 2525, website www.famyouth.org.uk, price £6.00 inc. p&p.

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