

Dear fellow Catholic parents,

We would like to bring to your awareness that the Ministry of Education, together with the Health Promotion Board has implemented an STI/HIV prevention program entitled “Breaking Down Barriers” which aims to “to give students accurate information on STIs, HIV and contraception from a health perspective.”¹ A factsheet describes the program as consisting two parts, a mass talk segment which includes a multimedia presentation, video screenings and a short question and answer session as well as a class component.² This is compulsory for all schools including mission schools and is conducted at the Secondary and JC levels.

We are deeply concerned that the video being shown as part of this program entitled “the Sex Files” is contrary to Catholic teaching on sexuality education and promotes, in the words of the Pontifical Council of the Family "safe sex" or "safer sex", a dangerous and immoral policy based on the deluded theory that the condom can provide adequate protection against AIDS...rather than insisting on abstinence outside marriage and fidelity in marriage as the only true and secure education for the prevention of this contagious disease.³

We are further disturbed by the fact that such a video is compulsory even in Catholic schools where a Catholic parent who sends their child there should reasonably expect, notwithstanding the difficulties Catholic schools are facing these days, an environment where their children are formed in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Refer to the appendix A for a detailed list of the objections to the BDB programme and a critique of the video which we have prepared from the perspective of both faith and reason.

We urge you to consider the following actions to bring about change with regards to the BDB programme in our Catholic schools:

- a. Request the schools to show the Catholic parents the video “The Sex Files” so that parents can decide if the BDB programme and video are suitable for their children.
- b. Write to the Archdiocese Commission for Catholic Schools (via the Executive Director Ms Wendy Louis wendyl@catholic.org.sg), your child’s school, the Ministry of Education (via the Minister of Education Dr Ng Eng Hen ng_eng_hen@moe.gov.sg) or the Health Promotion Board (via the CEO Mr Lam Pin Woon lam_pin_woon@hpb.gov.sg) to request that they at least respect the rights of Catholic schools to teach sexuality education in a manner consistent with the ethos of the Catholic Church. Also, to insist on a video which reflects the positive virtues of chastity and abstinence before marriage is produced and taught as an alternative to the BDB in our Catholic schools.

¹ <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/scope/>

² <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/social-emotional-learning/sexuality-education/files/breaking-down-barriers.pdf>

³ Pontifical Council for the Family “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality” no.139
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html

- c. Parents have the right to exercise their parental authority and since MOE allows parents to opt their children out of the *BDB* programme, parents should go ahead and opt out as a sign of objection and rejection to the promotion of the use of the condom as shown in the *BDB* programme.
- d. Sign up your children for Sexuality Education courses in the Archdiocese or parish Catechism Programmes that are in line with the Catholic Church's teachings on sexuality. Examples of such programmes are *Theology of the Body*⁴, *Wonderfully Made*⁵, *Celebration of Life*⁶.
- e. It must be remembered that parents are the first and principal educators of their children⁷ and it is imperative that parents do not let those things which will corrupt their children take root. Equip yourself with the knowledge and tools to talk to your children about the truth and meaning of human sexuality. We cannot afford to be ignorant nor shy about teaching our children in an area of such great important.

This letter has been prepared by Andy Wee with contributions from various concerned Catholics.

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⁴ <http://familylife.sg/2010/07/29/theology-of-the-body-for-teens/>

⁵ <http://familylife.sg/education-outreach/celebration-of-life-education-and-formation/>

⁶ <http://www.wonderfully-made.org>

⁷ The Pontifical Council for the Family. The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family. No. 05. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from:
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html

Appendix A

Introduction

The video “The Sex Files” jointly produced by the Ministry of Education and Health Promotion Board is unfortunately rooted in an inadequate understanding of human nature and does not portray the full truth and meaning of human sexuality.

Objections to *BDB*

- *BDB* claims to teach youths how to make informed decisions, but it fails to adequately state the failure rate of condoms in preventing HIV/AIDS or other STIs. In the programme it is briefly stated that condoms are not 100%, but are better than nothing, yet that doesn't give youth full comprehension of the dangers which exist in having 'protected sex'. For example, the International Planned Parenthood Federation has stated that condoms only reduce the transmission of HIV by 70% when compared to unprotected sex⁸. There is a huge difference between a youth believing condoms are highly safe and noticing that there coming to the realization of a huge failure rate. The truth is that condoms fail about 10%-30% of the time. Issues pertaining to temperature damage to condoms, permeability, and improper usage are not addressed. Our children are being taught to gamble with their lives, to play Russian roulette. The trouble with condoms is only compounded when viewed in the light of other STIs.
- *BDB* claims to teach Abstinence, but in the programme there is little given to support that claim. There is a fleeting mention that not having sex is the best choice, but there is nothing promoting this or supporting it. The programme's emphasis is on condoms and the promotion 'safe sex', even the testimonials only speak to the people who have contracted HIV/AIDS, but there is not one testimonial pertaining to remaining abstinent. In fact, during the video it portrays a girl being pressured into having sex, and what she does when she gives in, but there is no demonstration of the virtues of fortitude and temperance or demonstration of adequate life skills to cope with the situation in respect to maintenance of human dignity or to facilitate a true understanding of love.
- Programmes such as these facilitate the reduction of sex to something that is common place. It provides a distorted individualistic concept of freedom diminishes the basic values of life, human love and family. Further, they tend to lead to the deformation of consciences and take advantage of the parents' difficulty in teaching such material or lack of preparation⁹.

⁸ Willard Cates, *How Much Do Condoms Protect Against Sexually Transmitted Diseases?*, in *IPPF Medical Bulletin*, 31 (Feb 1997) 1: 2-3.

⁹ The Pontifical Council for the Family. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family*. No. 01.

- The programme is also immodest, as it portrays a model of an erect penis for condom demonstration. It attacks the moral sensibilities of our youth and uses a pornographic tool to teach its lesson, which opens the youths' minds to curiosity and can be traumatic.

Critique of the Video “The Sex Files”

A. Portrayal of diseased genitalia without adequate warning (2:40-3:20)

While the purpose of such a portrayal is to show the real effects of STIs, it must be done with adequate warning to the audience as it is very likely that such graphic portrayals may be upsetting or embarrassing for school children, especially if shown in mixed classes. The Pontifical Council for the Family reminds us that in passing on sexual information in the context of education for love, the instruction must always be "*positive and prudent*" and "*clear and delicate*".¹⁰

B. Portraying a girl pressured to have sex and giving in (10:43-16:22)

This scene portrays a man John requesting sexual intercourse with Jenny using a certain amount of subtle pressure which his girlfriend Jenny finally acquiesces to after requesting that he goes for a blood test. Such a portrayal unfortunately fits in with a very disturbing study done at La Trobe University which reported that up to 38% of final year females report having unwanted sex. It does nothing to suggest that boys should not be applying such pressure nor does it attempt to discuss what true love is all about, a gift of self for the sake of the other.

C. Failure to mention that the condom reduces the risk of infection only for some STIs and its effectiveness is further hampered if one is drunk or high on drugs (18:00-19:00)

This segment of the video claims that while “saying no is the best way” to protect yourself against STIs, it nevertheless also says that “condoms protect against most STIs” and that “while it’s not 100%, it is better than nothing.” It ends with a reminder that “condoms only work if they are used properly”. Such a portrayal is extremely misleading. The actual risk reduction offered by the condom is not mentioned. The Bulletin of the World Health Organisation for instance states that the use of condoms reduces the risk of HIV infection by 80%, Chlamydia by 26%. The evidence for risk reduction afforded by the condom in ulcerative STIs such as chancroid and syphilis is less assuring. This is largely due to the fact that “Genital ulcer diseases, like syphilis, can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered.” In other words, persons who use a condom correctly and consistently are still at significant risk of contracting an STI.

Worst still, the effectiveness of a condom is further reduced when a person is drunk or high on drugs. An earlier segment of the video itself (7:58-10:02) shows a couple having sexual intercourse without the use of a condom as both were drunk. Studies show that such a scenario is far from atypical. Teenagers for instance are relatively poor users of both barrier (condom) and

¹⁰ The Pontifical Council for the Family. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family*. No. 126.

hormonal contraceptives. A review by Tripp and Viner in 2005 reported that “over 90 percent of pregnant teenagers had discussed contraception with their general practitioner in the year before becoming pregnant.” Another study of 10,954 high school students in the May 2006 issue of the British Medical Journal noted that condom slippage was experienced by up to 33% of teens who had used it and condom breakage by up to 25%. Moreover, studies have also shown that when individuals are given a device which they believe protects them from the harmful consequences of their actions, they tend to then engage in even higher risk activities, such as having more sexual partners. As Professor Jokin de Irala, a Spanish epidemiologist has observed, “condom promotion, may, if not carefully implemented, actually foster a false sense of security in youth and lead paradoxically to increased risk taking behaviour.”

Indeed, if a teenager was to take the advice of this video and use a condom but finds himself nevertheless contracting an STI, one would have good reason to wish that they have urged him to abstain instead.

D. Graphic portrayal of how to use a condom (20:15-21:15)

There are several things to be said about this segment. One could point out that the portrayal of a model erect penis is in itself immodest. One could also note that the several steps described to ensure correct condom use is already difficult to follow when one is sober and even more so when one is sexually excited or high on alcohol or drugs. And finally, there is also logical reason for a vendor who shows this to deem such a portrayal as inadequate and decide on more graphic forms of sex education i.e. that actual penis models be used and time set aside for pupils to practice wearing the condom. This is of course a further assault on the moral sensibilities of young people and leads necessarily to a coarsening of the conscience and an inability to appreciate the mystery of human sexuality.

E. Failure to include testimonies from persons who have chosen abstinence and are happy that they did or testimonies from persons who were once sexually active and have stopped doing being so (21:22-21:50)

The video ends with testimonies of persons who have contracted HIV. While such testimonies are realistic and heart-rending, it does not include testimonies of persons who have chosen abstinence and are happy nor did they include testimonies from person who were once sexually active and have stopped doing so. Scare tactics alone do not change lives. Human beings need a vision of human happiness and to learn that there is always hope even if they have made mistakes.

Conclusion: Choosing programs that work to reduce STI/HIV infection and are faithful to Church teaching

Programs that are faithful to the Church's teaching on human sexuality are available and have been well received internationally. TeenStar¹¹, a developmental curriculum which uses learning one's fertility pattern to teach responsible decision-making and communication skills in the area of sexual behavior and enhances teens' self-understanding and self-esteem for instance, was developed by Sister Hanna Klaus MD who used to do work for the United States Bishop's Conference on life issues. Over 90% of female and male virgins remained uninvolved while 30-65% of previously involved students stopped during the year-long Teen Star program.

Another program, "It's your Choice" developed by Choicez media is being used in Australia and is developed by Jonathan and Karen Doyle, who are graduates of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family. Both these programs are suitable for both Catholic and non Catholic audiences.

The Archdiocese of Singapore can consider designing a program or making a video modeled on these programs. Our children deserve the full truth and meaning of human sexuality. We pray that this may be courageously proclaimed to the people of Singapore.

For more references, refer to <http://lejuene.caritashost.com>.

¹¹<http://www.teenstar.org/index.asp>