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Our opinion

An act of faith

Are children the property of their parents, or are they distinct, whole human beings with rights all their own?

That seems to be the question at the core of many social issues weighing upon the public these days.

Conservative efforts to halt what has been termed "permissiveness" regarding young people seem to center on the notion of parents' rights to be notified of all matters concerning their children, particularly as regards sex.

At first glance, and for those of us raised in middle-class ethic, that seems a reasonable proposition.

That's why conservative forces in the city, including Staten Island's own representative on the New York City Board of Education, sought to make the distribution of condoms in public schools conditional on parental notification. Whether that was a ploy to defeat the purpose of the condom plan or an ideological stand is irrelevant. The concept of mandatory parental notification has much support in this borough and elsewhere.

Dr. Irene Impellizzeri, Board of Education member from Brooklyn, accuses the board of "driving a wedge" between parents and children by allowing condom distribution.

More recently, a bill to require health workers to notify parents of minors seeking abortions was introduced --- and defeated --- in the New York State Assembly. The legislation was sponsored by our own Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly. Again, Mrs. Connelly personally opposes abortion so the intent of her legislation could well have been simply to limit access to legal abortions.

In both instances, the principle of the right of parents to be notified about the efforts of their teen-age children to prevent conception, or to escape conception's biological aftermath, seems to be critical.

But is the assertion of this right realistic, or fair? Will forcing teens to disclose their need for condoms, or an abortion, bring parents and children closer together, as Dr. Impellizzeri suggests?

Children, of course, are subject to their parents' authority, legally until they reach the age of majority. The fact is, however, that a parent's ability to control every aspect of a child's life diminishes steadily from its birth. Some would say that the parent's right to do so diminishes along a parallel line.

It seems to us the problem arises from the myth of parents universally being wise, compassionate, understanding and emotionally stable --- certainly far more capable of making rational decisions than their teen-age children.

Being so well qualified, in some people's eyes, parents have a perfect right to know if their teen-aged daughter is pregnant or their teen-age son wants to get condoms.

If that blithe belief in the notion that parenthood automatically confers upon a person wisdom and emotional stability were ever based in fact, it's surely not now. We see and hear of too many cases where one or both parents are the problem in a family, and teen-agers are captives. After all, not all drivers are competent, responsible people, and you need a license to become a driver!

Maybe most parents are good, decent, responsible people, but there are enough exceptions to justify not forcing all young people from having to 'fess up to their parents about their sex lives.

And no, teens shouldn't even be getting married, let alone having sex. In a perfect world, they wouldn't be. But they are having sex. It does absolutely no good to deny the truth.

The myth of the universal competence of parents is easily dispensed with, so what is the bottom-line, last-ditch stand of the absolutists who insist on parental notification? It's this: "Any parent has a right to know what his teen is doing in terms of sexuality. It's his kid."

Never mind that a given parent may be a drunk, or violent, or a philandering, self-absorbed fool. Never mind that in some cases --- more than we'd like to believe --- a teen forced to notify a parent about an intended abortion or condom acquisition may even be endangering his or her life, let alone risking physical and verbal abuse.

The most important thing to the moral absolutists is not the welfare of the teen-ager, but the preservation of the proprietary rights of the parents of the teen-ager. The principle must be protected at all costs. They have full, unequivocal faith in parents; none in teen-agers.

And schools and institutions that dispense information, materials and services to teen-agers as if they were independent, separate human beings threaten that principle and must be denounced, according to the moral theory of public policy.

It may be good politics to pretend that we can return to an America of white-picket fences, ice-cream sundaes, (supposedly) virginal teen-agers, and (supposedly) Solomon-like parents with a wave of a magic wand. It may be good politics to assert the rights of even the most irresponsible parents to control their teen-agers. It's for sure lots of politicians are doing it.

But we think nostalgia for fantasized innocence past or present is a dangerous waste of time. Let's face the real issues of today's world in realistic ways.