

# **The Case Against Puritanism**

**It's Time To Give It Up And Let Teens Get Off**

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**Please note: If you're not reading this column while sustaining the ability to both retain your sense of humour with your tongue in your cheek, and take it seriously, you won't get much out of it. This column discusses underage sexuality, neo-puritan/anti-sex ideology, (briefly) pedophilia, transphobia and sexual assault.**

Teens are horny. This is one of those truths that somehow, everyone knows, and yet, we frequently have to reassert in the face of people desperately trying to cling to the idea that teenagers are also children. Teenagers are innocent children until they're eighteen; the number of teen pregnancies, mononucleosis and chlamydia epidemics in schools, free condom drawers in need of replenishing in nurse's offices and eleventh-graders caught in the backs of movie theaters is, obviously, beside the point. Sometimes, the same people will in one breath talk about how "men can't help themselves" if teenage girls are going to wear sexy clothes at school, and then wonder why teen girls would keep wearing sexy clothing if they're So Innocent. Clearly it's a mistake and they don't know what they're doing.

At the beginning of the 2010s, it felt like we were making some progress against this. ACT-UP's efforts during the AIDS crisis are precisely why we have free condoms all over the place (and Planned Parenthood thanks them mightily). In Ontario, we had a school curriculum go through that would begin to teach kids the essentials of sex ed as early as Grade 3, lining up with research that shows that teaching kids about sex early actually helps them identify abuse to authorities, rather than opening them up to it, as conservative pundits claim. Then, in what was both a very sudden and a retrospectively-foreshadowed collapse, it all started sliding backwards again. Doug Ford's election in Ontario rewound all that progress, and laws like SESTA/FOSTA in the USA have shut down hundreds of sites that previously made sex work, hookup culture and pornography/erotica safer, more accessible and easier to find. Notables include the personals section of Craigslist, Backpage, the ban of NSFW content on Tumblr, and even more and more rigid censors on sites like Pornhub, XVideos, and others.

Of course, to a lot of people, this doesn't seem that important. Porn finds a way, and what's so bad about making sure teens can't get to it? Maybe they should wait until they're eighteen to bang, or get to porn. There's all of this stuff about porn giving teens unrealistic expectations. Look what happened with Fifty Shades of Grey, after all. And fanfiction teaches horrible ideas about sex – didn't one fanfiction use car oil as lube? No, no, far better that they be kept away from sexual content until they're Old Enough.

For a long while, I've combated this on other people's terms. "Yes, but—" "Yes, I suppose—" "Have you considered—" And frankly, I'm tired of it. So, fuck it. Let teens get off. Stop trying so hard. And here's why:

## **1. Sex Isn't Bad For You**

This one is huge, actually. So much of this is positioned on this idea that sex is bad for you. We control access to pornography the way we do anti-depressants and cigarettes! And, counterpoint: it's not. You can get pregnant from sex. So, give teens condoms, and access to the morning-after pill, and access to abortion clinics. And you can get STDs. So – condoms! And medical access! And good lord, we really should have PeP and PreP everywhere, shouldn't we?

The reason we don't is because we don't want them having sex at all. And even besides the fact that we have these tools and these items for safe sex on hand... We don't give teenagers enough

credit. Recently, there was a big to-do about kink at Pride parades, and how teenagers being “exposed to kink” was so terrible for them. All I could think about was how I did more kinky stuff as a teenager than I have as an adult. See, teenagers don’t want to get pregnant, or AIDs, or syphilis. If you have teens educated about how these things work, they’re smart enough to go “I don’t like that. I don’t want that.” So you know what they do? They have sex in every other way possible. There’s a reason there’s a trope about Christian schoolgirls doing anal. There’s also a trope about schoolgirls sucking dick, and let’s not get into how many teenagers stumble into their love of chastity and orgasm denial, or sadomasochism, or bondage – just because they were fooling around and knew they didn’t want to do the “Real Thing”.

Of course, once you start talking about kink, you’re talking about different dangers. I definitely did a few things as a teen where I’m glad nobody got hurt. But once again, the issue isn’t the sex. (And really, just telling me How to do the things would have solved stuff pretty quickly. Google was my friend on numerous occasions.) Sex is not inherently bad for you. It’s not addictive. It’s not toxic. It’s not corrosive. So why are we so worried about teens having sex with each other? Frankly, some of the things we do let teens do – go to school high on energy drinks, drive cars, double-ride bicycles and scooters, pull all-nighters to finish homework – have significantly worse long-term effects than getting a good orgasm in here and there.

## 2. Even If It Was, Sex Isn’t Porn

“Yes, but they’re not only having sex with each other,” is the obvious reply to the above. And you’re correct. Once you have sexually active teenagers, you have opportunistic adults. There’s a rising trend of teenagers identifying themselves as “AAMs” (adult-attracted minors), a term usually given to them by pedophiles who are only too happy to tell them it’s somehow exceptional or strange for them to be attracted to adults. For teens reading this, by the way, it is not. It’s completely normal, and anybody who tells you otherwise is being exceedingly creepy.

But certainly teenagers having sex with adults is dangerous; I also tend to lean the direction of saying that while casual hookups with adults (for older teens) lives in a grey zone of risk, relationships are where the true danger lies. If you’re getting your rocks off with a random grown-up, it’s at least anonymous – relationships and emotional investment are where the gaps in maturity and the vulnerability come in. (To be clear, this isn’t me espousing the first. Not worth it, kids, you don’t know where he’s been. Although you can say the same for a lot of teenagers.)

But here’s the thing. A lot of this paranoia ends up circulating around the Internet... which is where that differentiation suddenly becomes pretty important. The common response from adults in NSFW spaces on the internet is “no kids, ever, period, full stop” – which I fully understand! But it somewhat elides the actual issues and harm involved, and conflates harm w/ legal issues. Teenagers viewing and enjoying porn of adults is not and should not be viewed as a boundary issue, not when we’re talking about public accounts and sexual services; it’s a boundary issue when it turns into a relationship, because either the adult is doing it with eyes open (yikes) or the teen in question has lied about their age (YIKES). It’s also a huge issue when teens start sending pics of themselves, because unintentionally or otherwise, they’re creating child pornography; this is an issue legally – under US law, they can actually be prosecuted for this – and ethically, where the nature of circulating images means they’re likely to end up in a collection by dint of being underage, whether they “look it” or not. And finally, the issues with US law mean that

– horrifically – more than once, adults have been prosecuted for “supplying pornography to a minor” even when that direct relationship didn’t really exist. So the over-protectiveness and the building of a fence around this spaces makes sense. It’s entirely logical, at least from that perspective.

The issue is that in doing so, a lot of the assumptions around teens and sexual urges get reinforced, and a flip happens where the teens are often portrayed as the predators for wanting access at all; reactions of “ew gross” or calling them freaks are far more common than they should be, and the fear of Being A Predator overrides the sense of relation that people might otherwise have. It’s entirely natural for teens to seek out pornography! Curiosity, sexual urges, you name it – there’s nothing wrong with it. The laws that punish people so strongly and unfairly for what in the past amounted to teens clicking the “yes, I am 18” button and cackling behind the screen are the issue, not teenagers being... teenagers.

And both the law and the people afraid of it forget a crucial point; while things like sexting and sharing nudes blur the line, for sure, pornography is not sex. If I watch porn with someone in it, I’m not having sex with that person. If I have a private conversation with them that turns sexual, then yes, that’s a different conversation. But I’m not fucking them by watching them in a porn video. Teenagers watching porn are watching porn. And honestly, if in the moral panic, you take away teenage access to pornography, you’re really just making it more likely for them to have unsafe and early sex. (For porn’s issues, I actually did figure out what condoms were and how they worked from a latex fetish video. So, you know.)

### **3. Who Else Gets Hurt?**

Alright, so teens are horny, but they shouldn’t fuck adults. We can agree on that.

So can you tell a teenager from an adult by looking at them?

I’m sure somebody’s saying yes. You’re also definitely wrong. Trans men frequently look far younger than our age, for one; petite women are frequently taken as younger than their age, too. Black folks are read as older, Asian folks as younger, and teens with big chests are always read as adults first.

This isn’t, to be clear, a justification for adults seeking out teenagers for sex. The issue with that is a matter of emotional maturity, and the question of “why aren’t you having sex with adults”? The very fact that teenagers are physically indistinguishable from adults in their 20s is a point against, not for this; it scuppers the idea of there being any visual or identifiable thrill based on a “teenage” body.

What does happen, however, is that in the mad rush to stop teenagers from accessing pornography at any cost, an awful lot of people get caught in the blowback. Take the above example, with adult spaces cracking down on there being any under-18 presence in their spaces. It’s good that adult spaces are taking this seriously. It’s not so good when it starts taking the form of policing what people look like; more than once, sex workers have had to go to ridiculous lengths to prove that they are, in fact, over 18 and just small-framed, or even more ridiculously, have a penchant for things like lolita fashion. Or when fandom spaces begin requiring everyone to be over 18, even for events that are partially or exclusively SFW, out of the fear that someone Might Say Something Horny. Or, horrendously, when NSFW discords and social groups start requiring

ID for adults to enter and remain within the discord – at risk of, apparently, being accused of being a minor lying about their age.

The last one is one I want to dwell on for a little while, in particular because SESTA/FOSTA has made the world so much less safe for sex workers – and the world’s never been particularly safe for sex work! It’s also not particularly safe for trans people (who, statistically, are also very likely to be sex workers or at least consider it) who already have to go through the everyday trials of our IDs not matching up with “us”. It’s one thing for places like OnlyFans to require ID; that’s reasonable, if frustrating. It’s quite another for online strangers to essentially blackmail people into sharing IDs with the threat of telling everyone they’re underage if they don’t feel comfortable doing so!

Nor is it effective – even slightly. The request for ID, every time I’ve run into it, has been couched within the language of “well, we have no other option”. It loses every bit of its power the moment you recall that teenagers have been using fake IDs to drink, fuck, drive and vote since the forties. And now we have Photoshop! It’s a shockingly short-sighted requirement, one that asks adults to doxx themselves and open themselves up to harassment, spam, misgendering, and other unwanted attention... purely so a teenager doesn’t talk about sex with adults. We’re not talking about a bathhouse; nor, in the vast majority of these cases, are we talking about sexting rooms. They’re NSFW chats, where people talk about their kinks, often in relation to fantasies and fiction. Somewhere along the way, we’ve lost sight of how “bad” that actually is. Should it be avoided? Sure. Is it worth endangering everyone else to avoid? Absolutely not. Let’s get some reality checking in here.

This is without getting into how quickly someone can be accused of being a pedophile for so much as following a minor by accident on NSFW Twitter, dating someone 17 when they’re 19, or other similar things that just do not deserve the kind of vitriol they get. Every time, the people who get hurt are not the people responsible for whatever imagined harm is coming to mind. And what is that harm, anyway. See point one! Sex is not a bad and evil thing. Sex is sex.

## **4. Let Teens Fuck And Fuck Up**

A ton of this also comes back to an essential piece of parenting advice that, in an increasingly interconnected world, is something everyone ends up needing to hear: let people make their own mistakes. Obviously, scale matters. Information matters. Always try. Tell your friend their boyfriend is a bad dude. Tell the kid you found appealing to pedophiles that they’re playing with fire. Tell your little brother that he needs an antivirus if he’s gonna keep going to weird porn sites.

But at the end of the day, if we can relax and put in the safeguards necessary, it will be okay to let teens fuck up. There is no force on earth that’s going to stop someone adolescent from making bad decisions. That’s the entire point of being a teenager. Puberty dials up the impulse part of your brain without all of those brakes and hard lessons and “FUCKSHITNO” buttons that you get from experience. But the experience is necessary. Our job as adults isn’t to take away the experiences; it’s to turn the broken legs into skinned knees. If someone gets pregnant by mistake, it’s our job to give them options beyond having their life ruined; to have things like abortion and the morning after pill on offer, and to be someone they can talk to. If someone gets involved with someone too old for them, what’s better: them being too scared to tell anyone as

the situation gets worse, or them being able to turn to a friend, a parent, anyone and saying, “I made a mistake”?

The more pressure we put on teenagers to consider sex a taboo thing, to make first times some sort of Sacred, Immutable Object and pornography something to hide and be ashamed of, the more we risk the next generation having all the same hang-ups that the rest of us do. There’s no reason we should continue the tradition of lying to girls that their first times should hurt, or letting teenagers circulate myths like Glee’s infamous hot-tub pregnancy because nobody will tell them the truth. But if we continue to buy into the idea that teenage sexuality is something to fear and hide and avoid, that’s exactly what we’ll do.

So: get over it. Stop thinking that acknowledging that fourteen-year-olds hump pillows and get horny when they make out makes you a pedophile. (For one, it’s an insult to how bad pedophilia is.) Fight to let teenagers access things like sex toys and vibrators along with all the free condoms. Focus on teaching teens the actual “dos and don’ts” of online, like not getting into relationships while lying about their age and not posting nudes of themselves, rather than trying to tell them that porn will rot their brains and then being shocked when they 1. find out you lied and 2. promptly stop listening to you. And stop worrying so damn hard about if a fifteen year old sees a pair of tits online. They were probably looking for them, they’re probably enjoying them greatly, and at the end of the day, panicking about it causes far more problems than it solves. The world will still turn. The human race will continue. (With gusto, probably.) And as a bonus, the inventor of Cornflakes will be spinning in his grave.

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