

The Charism of Teen STAR

Teen STAR® (*Sexuality Teaching in the context of Adult Responsibility*) is a program in education in human sexuality which is unique because it engages the experience of the woman's fertility sign centrally in the learning experience.

Teen STAR began as a way to prevent abortion, as the simplest way to prevent abortion is to avoid the crisis pregnancy. That in turn means understanding not only how babies are conceived, but the physical condition which makes conception possible, in other words, understanding one's fertility.

I had already begun to teach the fertility cycle to the young mothers whose babies I had helped deliver, when Dr. John Billings invited me to think seriously about helping teenagers when I was at the Billings Congress in Melbourne in 1978. At that time there were already numerous sexuality education programs for teens, some simply exhorted teens to remain chaste, others offered alternatives to intercourse or just offered contraceptives. Some also encouraged abortion. But none of these approaches honored the body as an essential aspect of the person. It was just the means to satisfy drives or urges.

Anyone who has dealt with teen agers knows that they are enormously self absorbed at this age and that everything, including their body, from a pimple to a hairdo, is of paramount importance. So it was learning their fertility cycle was very important for the girls. Thankfully the Lord provided a wonderful team to make this a reality. Mary Lou Bryant-Reid, a gifted teacher was one of the research team. She used her skills to meet the girls in the initial research cohort where they were. Rather than follow a medically oriented protocol, she asked the girls what they wanted to know about being a woman. Their questions began with what they could see – in this case, the mucus – and led to where it comes from and what causes it....every Teen STAR teacher knows this. One of the strengths of Teen STAR is that it helps the teen to discover her/himself.

This leads to self confidence and the ability to make one's own decisions rather than just going along with the group, or another person.

As the teens learn more about themselves they also discover the signals which they send, and take responsibility for them. In practical terms this leads to more modest dress and behavior.

As we were working with minors we always met with their parents to tell them what we hoped to teach their children. Even though participants make independent decisions to join the program they need permission from one parent or guardian. We had begun only with girls, but early on the parents asked us to work with their sons also. That required a male teacher, as the goal of the program is to help girls become responsible women and boys become responsible men. As men's fertility is constant from puberty onwards they need to understand the changes in their bodies which puberty brings. Because self possession is more "caught" than taught, a good role model is essential. The way the male teacher speaks is as important as what he says to help the boys understand and value growing into manhood. After all, the bodily changes are not only physical but involve the whole person. While an adolescent is physically capable of sexual intercourse, they are still at the level of self seeking. Adult sexual behavior is other-directed allowing the partners to seek one another's good. Fr. Donald Heet, an excellent educator, wrote our current young men's curriculum. Its pedagogy is parallel to the girls' curriculum.

The behavioral outcomes of both girls and boys in terms of either maintaining chastity or returning to it speak to the success of our approach..

Teens also need to realign their relationship to their parents in preparation for their adult roles. This is often difficult for both teens and parents. The parent meetings are helpful in this regard, not only in terms of understanding the process but in giving parents a chance to exchange ideas, and also to discover that all parents have challenges at this time. Too often they think they are the only ones who are not doing a good job as parents. Sister Ursula Fagan, a social worker and fellow Medical Mission

Sister who cofounded the Teen STAR program made great contributions to this process, as did Sister Mary Nora Dennehy, Ph.D. a Religious of the Good Shepherd and psychologist , and Mary Lou Bryant Reid. And so did dear St. John Paul II who wrote in his reflection on the Finding in the Temple that it was normal for the young Jesus to separate from his parents. In consequence, this is not the result of original sin and should not be fought against. A successful parent is one who raises his/her child to be a responsible adult.

God opened more doors to Teen STAR. Already in the late 1980's and early 1990's invitations to bring Teen STAR and together with support and translation of the syllabus came from UK, France, Switzerland and Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia and Chile. Uganda and Ethiopia started in 1999, Korea in 2003. Dr. Pilar Vigil not only began the program in Chile but has taken it to Spain, Portugal, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador – she will tell you herself! Not all seed has fallen on good ground. The parable of the sower applies to Teen STAR. But sometimes a seed that appears to be dead comes to life later, and we have seen some examples. Several of our pioneers are in this room, allow me to recognize them.

The fact that Teen STAR has taken root in so many countries testifies to its universal value, as human nature is the same everywhere, even though cultural expressions differ. Today Teen STAR is counter-cultural as strong forces not only advocate separation of sex from procreation, but even from relationship , and do so by treating fertility as a disease to be isolated from, predominantly, the female body. The means advocated are predominantly the contraceptive steroids whose physical side effects are becoming increasingly acknowledged. But the effects on the adolescent brain, to which Dr. Pilar Vigil already called our attention at our Ars meeting, are far less acknowledged and may have far wider societal effects as they interfere with the normal progression of brain development from impulse control to rational decision making. I hope Dr. Vigil will explain this in her talk, but briefly during

adolescence, especially ages 15-19 years, the brain reorganizes many of its „pathways“ discarding those no longer needed and establishing new ones. Decision making shifts from the midbrain, where many decisions are the result of impulses, to the higher area, the prefrontal cortex. Those pathways are longer and require rational reflection instead of impulsive responses. This process is not complete until the middle twenties. The normal sex hormones play a large role in path to maturity,, while contraceptive steroids, as well as drugs like heroin and marijuana can delay or distort the process, either prolonging adolescence or, in the case of heroin and other opiates as well as the „designer drugs“ cause antisocial behavior . As there is a world-wide effort to give LARCs -long acting reversible contraceptives- mostly implants and hormone containing IUD's - to young girls their effect may well have societal as well as personal effects.

Teen STAR seeks to help teens integrate their biological capacity to become parents into the emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of their personality. . It is unique because it is a self-discovery approach to learning about the truths the body reveals which allows the participants to internalize the knowledge not just know in a cognitive manner, and leads to a holistic view of relationships and commitment . The three major components of the program are learning fertility awareness, individual student follow-ups which include discussion of the meaning of any social interactions, and parental involvement. There are religious and secular curricula for Junior and Senior High and College students, and single teen parents. Research gathered over the past few decades show that the Teen STAR Program supports remaining or returning to chastity. .

Teen STAR seeks to help teens integrate their biological capacity to become parents into the emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of their personality. .

It is unique because it is a self-discovery approach to learning about the truths the body reveals which allows the participants to internalize the knowledge not just know in a cognitive manner, and leads to a holistic view of relationships and commitment.

The three major components of the program are learning fertility awareness, individual student follow-ups which include discussion of the meaning of any social interactions, and parental involvement.

There are religious and secular curricula for Junior and Senior High and College students, and single teen parents.

Research gathered over the past few decades show that the Teen STAR Program supports remaining or returning to chastity.

So in summarising, the goal of Teen STAR is to help young persons remain chaste. Not only will they avoid the physical but also the emotional and spiritual problems which come with engaging in an adult activity before they can engage in this activity in the setting of a committed relationship. While they may be physically capable of sexual intercourse, they are not yet mature enough to be self-giving. Waiting to engage in sex frees the teen to consider all vocational choices; marriage and family, single life or a special (religious) vocation.

Helping teens integrate the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of their sexuality allows them to enter adulthood freely, not having limited their options by impulsive decisions. This is an enormous contribution not only for the individual but for society as a whole. The fact that we encounter opposition should not discourage us. We need to meet those who disagree lovingly, engage them in dialog when opportune, and pray for them. Ultimately this is God's work. We can depend on His help even when he seems slow. You know from the feedback from your own work that what we are doing is good. And the culture needs us, even though it won't admit it yet – just like an adolescent!