



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY  
Of the Commonwealth System of Higher Education

*Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.*  
*Distinguished University Professor*  
*Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology*

May 2, 2005

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-6143

By FAX (202-226-3348)

Dear Representative Waxman:

I am writing in response to your request to review the new HHS website  
[www.4parents.gov](http://www.4parents.gov).

I am a scientist specializing in adolescent development, former President of the Society for Research on Adolescence, and President-Elect of the Division of Developmental Psychology of the American Psychological Association. I am also the author of several books for parents, including *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10 to 20* and *The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting* as well as one the leading college textbooks on this developmental period.

Overall, I would give the website mixed reviews. On the positive side, the basic material on effective styles of parenting and successful communication techniques is accurate and is presented in a way that many parents and other caregivers likely will find helpful. The descriptions of mental health problems such as depression, anorexia, and bulimia are all reasonable, as is the advice given on how to respond if one suspects that an adolescent may be developing one of these disorders. The material on drug and alcohol use also is largely correct, although it is very skimpy given the health focus of the site.

My main concerns about the website fall into four areas: (a) the overall organization of the site; (b) the absence of good information on normative features of adolescent development; (c) the exclusive focus on abstinence-only approaches to sex education and (d) the absence of any recognition that there are stages of development within the

adolescent years, and, consequently, that the needs of young, middle, and late adolescents are often quite different.

With regard to the first of these concerns, there appears to be no rhyme or reason to the way in which the website's content is organized. Discussions of sexual behavior dominate the website, although my understanding is that the site's purpose is to educate parents about a wide range of issues concerning parenting and adolescent health and development. Of the six main topics listed on the home page, for instance, three of them focus on sex. Similarly, the list of "talk topics" is almost entirely devoted to sexual activity. While I agree that talking to adolescents about sex is important, the topic should not receive this disproportionate amount of attention on a general purpose website. In my opinion, the website needs to be organized so that parents can better access general information about normative adolescent development rather than focusing their attention immediately on sexual activity and problem behavior.

Second, and along these lines, many important topics about which parents often have questions are completely absent from the site, including concerns about schooling, changes in the parent-child relationship during adolescence, peer relationships, and, more generally, normative aspects of intellectual, emotional, and social development. Most experts agree that the goals of effective parenting during adolescence are both to prevent problem behavior (which this website focuses on) and the facilitate positive psychological development (which this website generally ignores). Even within the topics that are covered, coverage is imbalanced in ways that strike me as very odd. Alcohol and tobacco use are clearly the most serious health risk behaviors to which teenagers are exposed, yet they receive less attention than the topic of sexual predators on the Internet (a hyped-up problem if there ever was one) or tattoos and body piercings. No responsible website on teen health should have such imbalanced coverage.

Third, it is obvious that the authors of this site are committed to an abstinence-only approach to sex education but that this commitment is grounded in opinion and not science. While it is certainly true that abstinence is an effective means of preventing unwanted pregnancy and sexually-transmitted disease, it is also important that parents understand that it is possible for teenagers to engage in responsible and safe sexual behavior. (And the assertion that oral sex is just as dangerous as intercourse is, as far as I know, completely at variance with the facts.) Virtually all systematic research on abstinence-only sex education shows that it is ineffective and, more importantly, that adolescents who have been educated in this way, but who are nevertheless sexually active, are actually less likely to practice safe sex than those who have been provided with accurate information on how to protect themselves against pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases. Portions of the site that deal with sexual behavior also contain overstatements and hyperbolic references to the benefits of marriage and the dangers of premarital and nonmarital sex. Many individuals (both adolescents and adults) have sex outside of marriage but do so in a responsible and safe fashion. (I also think that the not-so-subtle suggestion that divorce and single parenthood are responsible for the nation's social ills will alienate many potential users of the site, a large proportion of whom are themselves single parents with adolescent children.)

Finally, there is no recognition that the issues and concerns faced by young people may vary within the adolescent period. Although the website's authors state that adolescence spans the period from about age 9 to age 18, the information is presented as if the parent of a 9-year-old and the parent of an 18-year-old would approach issues in an identical way. The issues and strategies relevant to parenting 9-year-olds are not the same as those relevant to parenting 18 year-olds, and it would be useful to reorganize the website so that parents of children at different points of adolescent development can more easily access information relevant to their child's level of development. My suggestion is that the site be redesigned so that it is divided into three developmental periods: preadolescence and early adolescence (9-13), middle adolescence (14-17), and late adolescence (18-20). Topics could then be covered within each age period in a developmentally appropriate fashion.

Finally, I would urge the website's authors to include a resource guide that lists publications and other materials that parents might turn to for more detailed information and advice.

I hope these brief comments are useful to you and your colleagues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lauren Scutney". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "L".