

How can teens be convinced to say 'no' to premature sex? Dickie Barr tells about the work of *Love for Life* a Northern Ireland agency helping teenagers to do just that.

Love is for Life



Dickie and Janice Barr and family.

'N ever before have adolescents been exposed to such relentless media pressure to have sex as early as possible' (Dr Trevor Stammers, 1999).

How do we support teenagers today who face incredible pressure from media, peers, and in relationships to become sexually active prematurely? Today's teenagers are bombarded by media messages of recreational rather than relational sex. Increasing numbers have to cope with an environment of increasingly dysfunctional family backgrounds. Then there is the spectre of easy access to alcohol and drugs. Put all these together and it should be no surprise that many will lack the inner convictions and resistance skills to say 'no' in situations of sexual opportunity or pressure.

I have the privilege of being Director of *Love for Life*, a relationships and sex education project that supports young people and those caring for them in their decision-making about sexual choices. The project has enjoyed incredible growth and has the support of those working in the health and education arenas. The *Love for Life* post-primary programme is now used by an amazing 60% of the schools in Northern Ireland.

Interestingly enough, we did not originally set out to establish a Relationships and Sexuality Education project. Our original plan was to launch a 'crisis pregnancy' centre. *Love for Life* developed as an extension of this work and the realisation that it was important to address some of the root causes that bring teenagers to unwanted pregnancy.

Soon after the crisis pregnancy centre opened in 1994 we received invitations from local schools to talk about the work of the centre. This, coupled with seeing teenage girls in school uniform attending the centre for pregnancy tests, challenged us to look at what part we could play in relationships and sex education in our local and wider community.

TEACHER COMMENT

'A KEY FEATURE FOR US AND ONE WHICH THE PUPILS APPRECIATED WAS THE PROFESSIONAL MANNER IN WHICH SENSITIVE MATERIAL WAS PRESENTED AT A LEVEL APPROPRIATE TO THE PUPILS' NEEDS AND STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT'

A programme was developed for full year groups using a multimedia, interactive format. Team members and volunteers were trained to provide three different age-presentations to engage young people in discussion about various aspects of relationships and sexual choices. We now have five full time staff with a further three part-time. They are backed up by numerous volunteers who make up the two presentation teams as well as support staff.

This academic year we carried out pilot work with P7 pupils and in youth club settings. Presentations to parents and youth workers have

PUPIL COMMENTS

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'WE WILL USE WHAT WE LEARNT FOR FUTURE DECISIONS WE HAVE TO MAKE'

prompted development of a parent/carer programme, which has been presented to well over a thousand adults this current academic year.

Although we have secured statutory funding, so far on a year-to-year basis, we are heavily dependent on individual and church contributions, one-off voluntary trust contributions and fundraising events. God has always provided for our needs.

All the programmes are presented from an abstinence-centred perspective and affirm marriage. They emphasise the uniqueness of the individual, the positive choice of delaying sexual intercourse and of treating oneself, others and sex with respect.

We are amazed at how God has blessed the work since we opened our *Care For Life* crisis pregnancy centre in 1994 and how from that the *Love for Life* relationships and sex education project has developed. God has blessed and multiplied our efforts. We would probably not have had the faith to step out if we had known all that lay ahead and yet we are aware that the journey is probably only just starting.

God has given us an Irish-wide and British-wide vision for the *Love for Life* relationships and sex education project. We have already begun to make presentations in schools in the Republic of Ireland in Drogheda, Dundalk and Clonmel. Pilot work has been carried out in Birmingham and Basingstoke with ACET and with *Care For Life* personnel delivering the programme in their own local schools. The feedback from pupils, teachers and presenters was very encouraging. Now *Care For Education* is exploring ways whereby the programme can be adapted and rolled out in a consistent format across the whole of the UK.

It is my belief that young people today can make healthy choices if they are supported and empowered to do so. We in *Love for Life* are committed to reaching as many young people as possible by making the resource God has given us available for others to use. It has been our privilege to play a small part in the training and personal development of those we have presented to and we look forward to making an ever-greater impact alongside others in Britain and Ireland as God gives us the opportunity.

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Love for Life

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