

Learning self-discipline is

By Thomas Lickona

In his famous “marshmallow test”, Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel offered four-year-old children a deal: if they could delay eating a nice, fresh marshmallow until he returned from a 15-minute errand, he would give them two marshmallows. But if they ate the marshmallow before he returned, that would be the only one they would get.

What would you do if you were four? Different four-year-olds did different things. Some devoured the marshmallow in a matter of seconds. But others managed to wait the full 15 minutes and earn the second marshmallow. Mischel’s study subsequently followed its subjects into their senior year of high school and compared the “grabbers” with the “waiters.”

Those who could delay gratification at age four were, as teenagers: still better able to delay gratification in pursuit of goals; better able to make plans and follow through on them; more likely to persevere in the face of difficulty; more self-reliant and dependable; better able to cope with stress; better able to concentrate on a task; more academically competent – scoring, on average, more than 100 points higher on a college entrance exam than the children who did not delay gratification on the marshmallow test at age four.

Human beings, given the right support, tend to rise to meet high expectations. Chastity is difficult, but so is most of what is truly worthwhile in life. It is time for all of us, schools and parents, to raise the bar. Our children will someday thank us.

Mischel concluded: the ability to regulate an impulse in the pursuit of a goal is a “meta-ability” that affects the development of many other important capacities.

Through history, self-discipline – the control of our impulses, appetites, and passions – has been considered a mark of good character. In our time, however, wisdom about sexual restraint was swept aside by the sexual revolution, still mak-



ing its way around the world.

But there is hope on the horizon. Chastity may be making a comeback. In the United States, high school students who say they have not had sexual intercourse are in the majority for the first time in 25 years. There are fresh new voices speaking up for sexual sanity: Wendy Shalit, author of *A Return to Modesty*, and *Girls Gone Mild*; and Dawn Eden, a former rock music historian who has written *The Thrill of the Chaste: Finding Fulfilment While Keeping your Clothes On*.

What assets do young people need to be able to draw upon in order to live a chaste life style in our current culture? I think there are three:

The first is “ethical wisdom” about what is right and good and, in particular, why chastity is necessary for self-respect and authentic happiness.

The second is “strengths of character” that make it possible to live a chaste life style – virtues such as self-control in the face of sexual temptation; the self-respect that motivates modesty; a deep respect for the rights, dignity, and value of other human beings; a sense of responsibility for others’ welfare; the fortitude to resist sexual pressures; the integrity that keeps us faithful to our beliefs and values; the determination to start over if we’ve made mistakes; and, if one has religious faith,

the humility to rely on God’s grace in the face of struggles and failures.

Third, we need “ethical support systems”: clear teaching and good example from our parents; a school-based, character-centred course in marriage and family preparation; a school-wide culture of character; and solid teaching about chastity in our churches, temples, and mosques are examples of ethical support systems that, working together, can maximise the support a young person needs to live chastely in a world that does not value this virtue.

Let’s look more closely at each of these areas.

Ethical wisdom

How can we help young people develop the solid ethical wisdom they will need to lead a chaste life? Here are a dozen things we can do.

Teach the meaning of love. Love is more than feelings. All good things are worth waiting for. If it’s love, love waits.

Teach the meaning of chastity. Chastity is much more than not having sexual intercourse. As one speaker puts it, “You can refrain from sex and still be unchaste by looking at pornography, etc... Chastity is a way of living, of honouring the gift of your sexuality.”

Help young people develop a vision of

the key to lifelong success

marriage and a future orientation. Says one veteran abstinence educator: “Kids won’t be motivated to wait unless they know what they’re waiting for. Once they start thinking about marriage as a personal life goal and begin to think about what they would like to bring to their marriage, they have a real reason to save sexual intimacy for the special person they want to spend their life with.”

Teach the rewards of waiting. Ethical wisdom means understanding that waiting for marriage carries many rewards – immediate rewards as well as future ones. For example: waiting for marriage to have sex will make your dating relationships better because you’ll spend more time getting to know each other. Waiting will increase your self-respect. Waiting will gain you respect for having the courage of your convictions.

Teach the emotional dangers of premarital sex. For example one newsletter has shared stories from the lives of high school and college students that illustrate ten emotional dangers of premarital sexual involvement: worry about pregnancy and disease, regret, guilt, loss of self-esteem and self-respect, the corruption of character, fear of commitment – and others.

Develop the ethical reasoning needed to answer the question, “What if I use protection – doesn’t that make sex responsible?” Can our young people identify the ethical fallacies in this kind of thinking? Does using a condom really make unmarried sex a “responsible” act?

Examine the consequences of cohabiting. We should explain to them that part of the thrill of beginning a married life together is learning about sex together, just as in other areas of the relationship. We should also acquaint them with what

the research shows about cohabitation, which, as one scholar says, “is bad for men, worse for women and horrible for children”.

Address the question, How far is too far? Discussions of sex often focus on why not to have intercourse but don’t give clear guidelines concerning how far you should go if you don’t go all the way.

Teach media literacy. Especially in today’s media-driven culture, ethical wisdom must include the ability to think critically about all forms of media and fortify our young against pornography. With the rise of the Internet, you don’t have to seek pornography out; it comes to you. Ethical wisdom isn’t all young people need to resist this temptation, but clear thinking will help.

Develop religious literacy. Religious

likely to lead to ethical action if they build on a base of broader ethical understandings that apply to the full range of moral behaviour, not just to sex. For example, ethical wisdom also means helping students grasp the truth of a big idea: there is a “natural moral law” stamped into our human nature. Behaviours that are in harmony with this natural moral law are good and lead to happiness; behaviours that go against this moral law cause us problems.

Teach the skills of ethical decision-making. Part of the ethical equipment young people need in order to make good decisions in the nitty-gritty of moral living is a series of “ethical tests”. For example: The Golden Rule Test – Would I want people to do this to me? The Truth Test. The What-If-Everybody-Did-This Test.

The How-Would-My-Parents-Feel Test. And so on for religion, conscience, consequences and front-page-of-the-newspaper tests.

Strengths of character needed to live a chaste life

Ethical wisdom creates a disposition to behave ethically, but in a great many cases, wisdom alone will not be enough to guarantee moral action, especially chaste actions. In the

face of sexual temptations and pressures, we need a cluster of supporting virtues such as modesty, self-control, courage, and integrity.

How can character education help young people develop good character? There are literally hundreds of ways that can be found in the literature of character education, which has grown dramatically over the past two decades. Websites such as those of the Character Education Partnership, Boston University’s Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, and our own Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

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literacy – knowing about religion – isn’t the same thing as religiosity (seriously practicing a faith), but religious literacy is important and should be part of every student’s store of ethical wisdom. We should first of all encourage students to find out what their own religious tradition, if they have one, teaches about sex. A lot of them don’t know.

Develop an understanding of universal moral principles. All the forms of ethical wisdom I’ve discussed thus far have to do specifically with sex and reasons to be chaste. But these ethical insights are more

