

The “LUV” Roulette

By *Wendy Hamilton*

“My mother once came and told me that she didn’t know if Mick and I had sex but that if we had a loving sort of relationship then good — but she thought I was still a bit young for it”, a 16-year-old Canberra girl — let’s call her Jane — said.

She lit a cigarette. A budding woman-of-the-world who seemed to know a bit about life and its facts.

But after admitting she had been having sexual intercourse with her boyfriend of almost a year, she said she was not on the pill, nor used any contraceptive.

“I guess I could go to Family Planning but I just haven’t worried about it. Not really thought about it. Mick wants me to go on it — but . . .”, and a shrug.

Jane learnt about sex and contraceptives mainly from her parents, who, she says, have been honest and open about human relationships.

“I’d tell them if I got pregnant. They’d be pretty disappointed in me, but they’d help. Mick would want me to keep it, and so would I”.

But that is as far as thinking about pregnancy goes for Jane. It won’t happen to her.

And for a little girl of 14 — let’s call her Vicki — hanging around outside the Phillip Amusement Centre during a hot day in the school holidays, the same seems to go. She left school last year and has no intention of getting a job.

She’s tough. Chews gum with practised nonchalance and keeps glancing at her friends for approval. She’s proud to be asked about her “record” and tells of the score card she kept at school of the number of boys she had sex with. Her friends murmur agreement that she “knows all the tricks”.

“I learnt pretty early from my boyfriend (who was 18). We’ve broken up because he met another chick. So I go out with the boys — specially Jack in his van. We go to the drive-in”.

Vicki says she has had sexual intercourse with “hundreds of men”. Her record is four men in one night, but she knows of other girls who boast of up to 14 men in one night.

And through all this she uses no contraceptive and seems not to be concerned about the possibility of getting pregnant.



“No I don’t worry. I’d probably keep it, it’d be fun”, she said.

Vicki may be a hard case, the sort that comes to the notice of the police, and not typical of the way her age-group thinks and behaves. But she and Jane and many others girls of their age have one thing in common — they are naive and “romantic” about sex and the consequences, despite boasted knowledge of the facts of life.

This naivety is, according to a counsellor at the Abortion Counselling Service and sex education officer for the ACT branch of the Family Planning Association, fairly widespread.

“Girls of 15 or so have these romantic ideas about sex and babies and marriage”, she said.

This article won Wendy Hamilton the 1979 Australian Child and Family Welfare Award for Journalism. There were more than thirty entries in the competition from all over Australia. This article was originally published in the Canberra Times and is re-printed with their kind permission.

“They want to get married and have babies and they don’t realise that babies need 18 years of hard work. Some see babies as something they could own themselves, that no one could take away.

“Others see babies and marriage as an escape from maybe an unhappy home life with parents. And they see sex as one way of getting what they want.”

The concept of romantic “luv” as defined by Hollywood is also yearned for by some pubescent girls. And, the counsellor said, girls will have sexual intercourse with boyfriends so they won’t lose the “luv” of the boy and fail to conform with peer pressure.

Often a girl does not know how to say “no”. This may be because she feels guilty about not doing something some peers are doing and saying is OK.

But it could be that she is caught in the trap of “if you do, you’re a slut; if you don’t, you’re frigid” and is unsure of how to cope.

The counsellor said one way girls salvaged their consciences about whether or not to have sex was to refuse to go on the pill or take any contraceptive measures.

“They think that if they go on the pill they will have to admit to themselves that they are going to have sex. If they don’t go on it, then they say it’s not going to happen to them”.

“But then they might go to a party or on a weekend away with a group and they’ll see everybody doing it, so they think they have to, too”.



A Canberra doctor said that very few girls under 16 come to him for the pill for contraceptive purposes. “Usually they come with their mothers and want it more to regulate periods than for contraceptive purposes”, he said. Many doctors would be more guided by the emotional maturity of the patient than by her age.

One girl, 15, who has a boyfriend of three months and who went to the Family Planning Association for the pill, was advised on the use of the rhythm method. She is now keeping her fingers crossed until she turns 16.

Members of the Juvenile Aid Bureau, run by the ACT Police, deal with cases of girls missing from home for a few days or who have run away from home.

Constable Fiona Campbell-Brown said that in the course of questioning the girls they found out if they had had sex while away and if they were on the pill.

“I find that of the girls that come in, there are a lot who are on the pill and are more aware of what it can mean if they aren’t.”

“Charges of carnal knowledge are not very frequent, because there is often no one pressing charges, and in about 50 per cent of cases, the girls are the ones who began it all anyway”.

Boys, out to prove a virility which is generally untried or fragile at 14, 15 and 16, often have the attitude that “if she consents, she must be on the pill” and don’t worry any further about contraception. However, the counsellor said boys who had had sex education at school and home were more inclined to go out and buy condoms because they are more aware of the risks being taken.

“I think that boys do a lot of bragging and exaggerating about how many scores, how many girls they’ve had it off with, and this leads to pressure on other boys to brag or prove themselves to their friends.”

Sociologist Dr. Alice Day, in her thesis on boys’ and girls’ opinions of one another’s behaviour, says “Boys and girls are locked within their preconceived sex roles and communicate according to a set script instead of doing so according to genuine individual friendship”.

Supporting this, the sex-educationist for the ACT branch of the Family Planning Association, Mrs Jenny Kaye, said that when a boy took a girl out he felt he had to be dominant and the aggressor in sexual play. The girl had been brought up to be passive and she did not know how to keep a boy interested in her without being called a slut.

“They usually don’t go to parents for advice or explanations because they feel that they will embarrass the parents. So instead they listen to their friends”, she said.

“They are then afraid to ask their parents the truth about what they hear because they are afraid of being accused of being dirty”.

Mrs Kaye cited a survey of Hawaiian knowledge of sexuality which showed that there was a knowledge gap between “what young people know and what they believe they know” about sex and it was this gap that could be a reason for many unwanted pregnancies.

“They are supposed to know all about everything by the time they are teenagers. And because nobody asks a question until they know two-thirds of the answer, they never ask questions, and pretend to know it all”.

This ignorance can lead to some very big decisions for some young girls, but once again the attitudes of “it won’t happen to me” or “it will go away” come into play.

The director of Sydney’s Pre-Term Clinic, Dr. Sue Hepburn, said at a conference in Canberra last year, “It can be currently estimated that of every 100 teenage girls in Australia, eight will have an illegitimate child, 11 will marry because of pregnancy and 20 or more will have an abortion. That is, around 40 per cent of Australian women are pregnant before the age of 20 years”.

However, a counsellor at the clinic, Christine Fairy, said not many girls under 16 came to the clinic, “because they leave it too late, believing that it will go away”.

“At this age many girls haven’t established a regular period and may wait around before doing anything”, she said.

The abortion counsellor said girls would go to an older sister or girlfriend for advice and even after a pregnancy test proved positive, wait around too scared to tell their parents.

Even with the publicity given to abortion in the past two years, there’s still a lot of ignorance and irrationality in all age-groups about abortion.

A very young couple, the girl aged 15, the boy 16 to 17, came for advice because the girl was pregnant and told the counsellor they wanted fake passports to go to Bali before the parents found out about the pregnancy.

If parents are told (which is not often), the mother may come along with the daughter to a counselling session at the Abortion Counselling Service. About 50 per cent of the time it is the parents who want the daughter to have an abortion.

“But I make sure it is her decision and that she has weighed up the situation and her attitudes towards abortion, adoption or being a single parent”, the counsellor said. “It has to be her decision and no one else’s, so there are no regrets later”.

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The counsellor could count 11 girls of 15 years and one aged 14 who had come to her for advice in the past year. Only one had ever used a contraceptive and all had to be told the complete facts about abortion.

“We counsel them very well on prevention of unwanted pregnancies when they come in and we offer follow-up counselling, but usually the first sessions are enough”, she said.

Steps are being taken to increase young people’s knowledge about sex. Mrs Kaye has helped run sex-education sessions in Canberra and district schools since 1974.

The sessions, generally aimed at Year 9 and 10 students, can be altered to suit the needs of the students in association with teachers. Permission from parents for the children to attend the sessions is always sought first.

More than 500 school students have now taken part in the sessions in which friendship groups of 12 participate at a time. The sessions begin with talk about family peer relationships, attitudes toward the opposite sex and sexual relationships and then attitudes toward contraceptives.

Various contraceptive devices are shown to the students but the sessions are aimed more at developing individual values and attitudes to sex and contraception.

Mrs Kaye said the students were encouraged to do some “homework by talking to their parents about sex”.

“They often don’t know their parents’ attitude toward these things and quite often the parents are only too pleased to have the matter raised for them”, she said.

Students said about the sessions, “You are able to talk and express your feelings easily”, “You can say what you think without being embarrassed”; “Made people share feelings. I got to know the other people in my class”.

A girl at Melrose High said, “I have learnt a lot about contraception and VD. I have learnt about other people’s feelings and have learnt a lot about me. I have learnt to be able to talk openly with other people without embarrassment”.

Boys from the same school said they had learnt to respect girls and their views. A girl remarked, “I found out that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did”. Another said, “I think talking in mixed groups was good, it cleared up a lot of confusions for me”.

Mrs Kaye said, “They are usually amazed that they can sit and talk about sex normally. For many, sex is either treated as a joke or with a sermon, especially in homes”.

“Parents should talk to their kids about their bodies as early as possible, as soon as the kids can talk, then it is easier later on for them to talk about sex.”

Communication between the sexes, especially for young people finding their identity, is an extremely important aspect of growing up. As the Professor of Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Queensland, Douglas Gordon, said in his book ‘Health, Sickness and Society’: “The world which the young enter outside their homes is very important in influencing their attitudes and continuing the process of their socialisation . . . The most important happening in this period will be the child’s first faltering footsteps towards establishing interpersonal relationships outside his family sphere.

“If these attempts fail then the subsequent adult is going to have quite a few visits to the doctor before his life span is finished, with a variety of emotional and psychosomatic symptoms.

“Of these interpersonal encounters the most important is the sphere of heterosexual relationships. Happy is the person who eventually achieves easy, relaxed attitudes to the opposite sex. In the meanwhile, our young tyro, what with trying to establish his status in the peer group of his own sex and to unravel the mystery of conflicting emotions towards the opposite sex, is very likely

to go through one of the most excruciatingly painful periods of his life”.

If girls cannot turn to parents, and perhaps find sisters and friends cannot supply the proper advice or support they feel they need, they can turn to church ministers.

The assistant Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, the Right Reverend Neville Chynoweth, said that often girls turned to their parish clergyman for advice. “It’s basically up to the parish clergy to direct the people who come to them. Our church believes in chastity for single people”.

The Catholic Church offer a more structured service of counselling through its Catholic Social Services centre in Canberra Avenue, and of course there is counselling through parish priests.

The Uniting Church, according to the Reverend Keith Doust, secretary for the Canberra Presbytery, has at the moment no set policy on girls under 16 and contraceptives, but anyone can go to the parish minister for help and support.

The Pregnancy Support Service, on 47-5050, is a community care service for pregnant women. It can provide counselling, advice, accommodation, and, where necessary, transport and child-minding facilities. Counselling is carried out either by telephone or in person.

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Mary Riestroffer leading workshop

More than 200 participants from throughout Australia attended the First Australian Foster Care Conference held at the Chevron Hotel in Sydney from the 1st to the 5th of September, 1979 and sponsored by the Childrens Bureau of Australia.

Keynote speaker at the Conference was Professor Mary Riestroffer, (pictured left) Professor of Social Work, University of Wisconsin extension, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

The theme of the conference, ‘FAMILIES HELPING FAMILIES’ featured prominently in the Commitment to Caring Statement brought to the final plenary session of the conference.

It was declared that ‘FAMILIES HELPING FAMILIES’ was fundamental to the goals of foster care and was also a test of its effectiveness.

Proceedings of the Conference will be available in early 1980.

The Childrens Bureau has obtained the rights to publish several of Mary Riestroffer’s papers and articles related to the foster care of children. The first of these publications will be available shortly.

Information regarding either the proceedings of the Riestroffer articles should be directed to the Childrens Bureau of Australia, P.O. Box 18, NORTH MELBOURNE, Vic. 3051. Telephone (03) 329-6277.