

# Human Sexuality Training for Religious School Students

In the spring of 2004, the New York Times Sunday magazine section carried a disturbing article entitled "Friends with Benefits." It described the latest trends among teenagers in dating - or rather, non-dating. The teens themselves explained that, instead of dealing with the turmoil of romantic relationships, friendships in which they could engage in casual oral sex (which, according to them, is not really sex) are simpler and preferable. This is disturbing not only because it suggests profoundly risky behavior, but also because it discourages our teens from learning to establish healthy, nurturing, loving relationships.

A group of Temple Beth El congregants and staff were brought together to form a task force to create a curriculum for our youth that would help them confront

some of the most difficult challenges they face in today's social climate. The Human Sexuality Task Force consists of parents, clergy, and educators, with expertise in teen health, sex education, pediatric psychiatry, infectious diseases, and Jewish values. The Task Force has consulted and participated in local and national programs, pulling together information and curricula from a wide variety of sources.

Why is this different from the classes taught in the public and private schools? Secular schools can certainly provide information, but they are unable to do two things that are at the center of what a religious institution does: communicate values and engage entire families. Information absent a value system will not give someone the ability to make good deci-

sions. And because parents are the primary sex educators, fostering parent-child dialogue and giving both the tools they need to be successful is the essential beginning of a good human sexuality education.

The Task Force set forth three goals: 1) to create dialogue between children and their parents; 2) to provide resources on Jewish values regarding human sexuality for both children and parents; and 3) to teach our children self-respect and respect for others by helping them deal with issues around human sexuality. After months of work, the Task Force has created Temple Beth El's first program for sixth grade students and their families called "Just Say Know."

The program consists of three sessions: a parent orientation to

present the program, answer questions, and give them the option to enroll their sixth grader in the student session; a half-day student session dealing with the topics of puberty, health and safety, self-esteem, and tolerance; and a dinner and follow-up session with students and parents together. Included for all participants is the acclaimed book *It's Perfectly Normal*.

We hope that this is a first step in helping our students form the healthy, loving and secure relationships they deserve. This program will be expanded to other grades in the future so that, for our children and their families, Temple Beth El will be a place of support and education, and a safe haven in which to wrestle with some of the most difficult challenges facing our youth today.

## The Human Sexuality Task Force:

Cantor Andrew Bernard, Andrew Bernstein, Marni Cartiff, Stephanie DiPaolo, Karen Franklin, Holly Gainsboro, Barbara Green, Susan Jacobs, Beth Rosenberg, Ginny Rosenberg, Tammy Seigel, Mary Thomas, David Weinrib, Sandy Zeskind, Barbara Ziegler. ☆



Temple Beth El

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