



Wellington Catholic
District School Board

APPENDIX

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Student Pregnancy

Issues and Directions
for Catholic Educators

Wellington Catholic District School Board

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1. THE ROLE OF OUR CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN STUDENT/ FAMILY DECISION MAKING

Educators who are most likely to be involved in dealing with pregnancy are guidance counsellors, chaplains, teachers of religious education or physical or health education, psychological services staff, or administrators. In fact, a troubled student may choose to confide in any trusted employee. For the purposes of this paper, the term educator will be used to refer to any teacher, chaplain or educational assistant in whom the student confides. We recognize that disclosure may be made to a trusted employee who is not a teacher, or to personnel of an agency or service that works in concert with our schools. Because the former group may or may not have received training in counselling, and because the latter group must be faithful to the mandate of their employer, it has been decided:

- that the bulk of this paper will be addressed to the Catholic Educator,
- that a special section within will deal with the relationship of the other groups of trusted adults.

When a student confides that she is pregnant, or a student confides that he has fathered a child, Catholic Educators have a responsibility to:

- the student who has made this disclosure, female or male. Educators will strive to provide an environment for the student that is supportive, affirming, and accepting. The role of the educator is to provide assistance for a student's decision-making in the way of information, insight, and support.
- the child in the womb. Catholic educators must serve as advocates for the child in the womb, as well as for the student. Information to support the rights of the child in the womb is provided on page 6 of this document.
- the student's parent/ guardian. Educators will make a concerted effort to inform parents / guardians and to involve them in the decision-making process as soon as possible and appropriate after it is ascertained that a student has conceived or fathered a child. When the student's health is in danger, a parent or guardian must be told.

It is important to emphasize that educators can contribute to an environment in which good decisions can be made, but they cannot make the decisions for the student. Educators will strive to be supportive rather than prescriptive or judgmental.

Educators are also aware that students may confide in other students before they speak to an adult member of the staff. Peer ministry programs in our secondary schools are excellent vehicles for providing support in difficult situations. Students who are peer ministers should be trained to respond appropriately when they are told of a student pregnancy.

We wish to make it clear that acting with compassion towards a troubled person does not imply that one condones the person's behaviour. Jesus was compassionate towards the woman who was about to be executed for adultery (John 8: 1 -11); his refusal to support the penalty prescribed in the law, coupled with his admonition to 'sin no more", certainly does not imply that he condoned the behaviour of the woman and her male partner.

Educators in the Catholic educational community in Wellington County are therefore encouraged to respond compassionately, as Jesus would in such situations. The Wellington Catholic District School Board is grateful for the support of the trusted person who responds to the needs of a troubled student in accordance with the principles outlined in the paper.

SUMMARY

1. It is the responsibility of Catholic educators, when told of a pregnancy, to respond with respect, compassion, and love.
2. Educators have a responsibility,
 - to assist the students' decision-making by means of information, insight, and support;
 - to support the rights of the child in the womb;
 - to make a concerted effort to involve the student's parent/guardian in the decision making process.
3. Having compassion for a troubled person does not imply that one condones the person's behaviour.

2. ISSUES OF CONFIDENTIALITY

The fundamental principle with regard to confidentiality is that the student's right to privacy should be safeguarded as much as possible. When a student has conceived or fathered a child, the student's right to privacy creates a difficult dilemma for the educator who has been entrusted with a confidential disclosure.

Educators are trained not to make promises that they cannot keep and will, therefore, not promise confidentiality to a student in advance of a disclosure. Often, however, students make a disclosure without prior discussion about privacy, and they sometimes demand confidentiality while expressing their fears about parental rejection or self-destructive behaviour. Educators must be cognizant of their responsibilities in such situations.

**The first questions to be considered with regard to confidentiality are:
"Who needs to know?" and "Why do they need to know?"**

Students have rights to confidentiality like any adult. A parent or guardian must be told, however, if the student's physical or psychological health is in danger. In all cases, the educator's first efforts will be directed towards the involvement of a parent/guardian in the decision-making process.

It is essential that educators not exceed the limits of their own competence. Educators who are unsure about the psychological state of a student or about the teachings of our Church should consult the school principal or another professional in guidance, psychological services, religious education or chaplaincy, while continuing to preserve the student's right to confidentiality.

It is appropriate for the educator to encourage the student and the parent/guardian to inform the school principal once the situation has stabilized (i.e. after it has been ascertained with certainty that a child has indeed been conceived, and after the student and parent / guardian have made some initial decisions about dealing with the situation). If the educator does inform the principal before the student and family would wish, the disclosure must protect the identity of the student. As for any other situation in the school, however, if the student's physical or psychological health is in danger, the principal must be informed.

The trust that a student affords when making a disclosure of pregnancy is sacred. Due to the intensity of emotions, this trust is also fragile. This trusting relationship may be even more delicate and fragile when the student is very young and is still in elementary school. Care must be taken to be faithful to this confidentiality if the educator is to be of real assistance to the student.

Similar respect for confidentiality is required if the principal chooses to inform senior administration of the situation.

SUMMARY

1. The student's right to privacy should be safeguarded as much as possible.
2. If the student is under sixteen years of age or if there is danger to the physical or psychological health of the student, a parent/guardian must be informed of the pregnancy by the principal.

3. DIRECTION OF COUNSELLING

A. RESPECT FOR LIFE FROM THE TIME OF CONCEPTION

In taking a clear stand against abortion, Catholic educators should assist students towards informed decision-making. One clear, concise statement of Catholic teaching is found in the chapter entitled "*Human Sexuality and the Will of God*" in the Ontario Bishops' Guidelines for Family Life Education (1987 edition, p. 13) (see *Appendix "A"*)

The two most important positions to establish with regard to abortion are:

- (i) **The humanity of the embryo/fetus**
Most students will agree that a child in the womb at term has rights equal to those of a child after birth, but there is more difficulty convincing students that an embryo has the same rights in the first trimester. Discussion of the issue should not be based simply on physical features such as cell structure, heartbeat, development of limbs, and movement. Rather, this issue is the essence of the embryo in the womb. If the child is a human being at birth, it is also a human being three months, six months and nine months before birth.
- (ii) **The value of the fetus' life over the other values**
Even when students agree that the fetus is a human being, they may still think that there are reasons good enough to justify ending the life of the child in the womb. For example, our Church teaches that if it is known that a child will be born with exceptional physical or intellectual needs, the child should be allowed to enjoy the gift of life, rather than having that life ended before birth. In the case of teenage pregnancy, the profound distress of the students involved and of their families is not an adequate reason for ending the life of the child in the womb.

SUMMARY

1. The child in the womb is human, and has rights equal to those of a human being after birth.

B. SUPPORT FOR A STUDENT WHO IS PREGNANT

Educators who are asked to help a pregnant student must recognize that their first responsibility is to that student; that the student's right to confidentiality must be respected under the standards enunciated in Section 2 and that the student's parent/guardian should be involved in the situation as soon as possible under the conditions described.

The educator is primarily a teacher of decision-making. That process can be assisted by creating a loving and affirming environment for the student by providing insight about the issues involved and by making available, supportive counselling and religious guidance to assist the student to deal with possible feelings of anger, helplessness or remorse.

The educator must also provide information about the student's options and rights, and about agencies which can assist the student. Such agencies may include:

- Birthright, which provides support for unmarried pregnant women;
- The Children's Aid Society, if a student under the age of sixteen is in need of protection;
- Local Public Health Unit; Teen Prenatal Classes
- Family Doctor;
- Educators should also help a student to become aware of the availability of financial support from a variety of social agencies.
- Alternative educational options available

In this context, it is pertinent to mention the role of the public health nurse in the school. A nurse may be the person in whom the student first confides; the nurse will respond with personal support, and professional assistance regarding medical and nutritional matters.

In particular, the educator will explain to the student how she can continue her education and maintain her career plans. The educator must assure the student that she may continue to attend classes as long as she is comfortable with doing so. Requirements regarding the school dress code should be relaxed upon the request of the pregnant student.

Should the student no longer wish to attend school, educators should, if possible, make alternative arrangements for the continuation of her education during the time before and immediately after birth. Indispensable to these arrangements, of course, is the informing of the school principal, which as stated above, is best done by the student and her parent/guardian after the situation has stabilized to some degree, or by the educator at the request of the student.

Responsibility for facilitating alternative educational arrangements will be shared by the parent/guardian, the educator, the principal, and the Superintendent of Schools.

SUMMARY

1. A loving, affirming environment, and supportive counselling and spiritual guidance should be made available to a pregnant student.
2. A pregnant student may continue to attend school as long as she is comfortable doing so.
3. Should the student no longer wish to attend school, the school administration shall make alternative arrangements for the continuation of her education for a reasonable period of time before and after birth.

C. SUPPORT FOR A STUDENT WHO HAS FATHERED A CHILD

A student who has fathered a child should be encouraged to accept his responsibility in whatever ways are considered appropriate. The father should be encouraged to take part in the decision-making process. This may include provision of long-term financial support for the child after birth, as well as the caring for the child after birth. Male students have a right to confidentiality under the principles outlined in section 2.

Educators should provide a supportive environment for such students, and direct them to appropriate counselling as they deal with possible feelings of anger, helplessness, or remorse. If the unborn child's life has been ended by abortion, miscarriage, still-birth or if the child has been adopted, bereavement counselling may be required.

Catholic moral principles about culpability, contrition, forgiveness, and compassion, outlined in section 4, can also be applied to the counselling of male students who have been responsible for a pregnancy.

SUMMARY

1. A student who has fathered a child should be counselled to accept his responsibility, and to participate in the decision-making in whatever ways are considered appropriate.
2. A loving, affirming environment, and psychological and religious guidance should be made available to a student who has fathered a child.

4. SUPPORT FOR A STUDENT WHO HAS GIVEN BIRTH

Students who have accepted the responsibility of carrying their child to term, and of caring for their child after birth, deserve every possible support in continuing their education with the added responsibility of parenting. After a student has given birth, she should continue her education as soon as she wishes to do so.

A student who has chosen adoption as her option may need extensive counselling services. The educational community may be asked to provide at least some of such service.

A student who has decided to keep and care for her child may also need extensive support in dealing with the demands of parenthood and the responsibilities of being a student. Relationships with the child's father and with both families may also require professional counselling. Educators may also be asked to facilitate the baptism of the child, although that is most appropriately the responsibility of the family in the parish community.

Further, principals are encouraged to review the extent and the universality of education in parenting in our schools. Elective courses on parenting should be offered through a variety of subject areas and modes of delivery. It is recommended that whenever possible, the school will assist in providing information about day care services for the student mother and child.

SUMMARY

1. A student who has given birth should be given extensive support, so that she may deal successfully with either adoption or parenting, and also continue her education.
2. Whenever possible, the school will assist in providing information about suitable day care services for the student mother and child.

5. COUNSELLING A STUDENT WHO HAS HAD AN ABORTION

While educators should present the arguments against abortion clearly and credibly, we must accept the fact that we cannot decide for our students.

A student who has decided to have an abortion has a right to absolute confidentiality within the educational community. We may not be able to prevent gossip in the student community, but we must not contribute to the spreading of the information in any way. It is therefore incumbent on all employees who are aware of the situation to maintain confidentiality and to support the student in the compassionate spirit of Jesus. Again, compassion for a person is not the equivalence of condoning the person's action. In particular, the student may seek counselling to help her deal with feelings of anger, helplessness, remorse, or bereavement that may ensue after an abortion.

In this situation, the educator / employee is reminded that his/her role is not to judge, but to counsel:

"However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God"

The student will be in need of a good compassionate listener who will assist her to make good decisions as she deals with her situation.

The employee / counsellor should be aware of the Church teaching regarding objective and subjective elements of morality. *Appendix 'B'* of this document is a copy of the section of *"Guidelines for Family Life" p.9, no.37-44*, which addresses this topic. These guidelines were published by the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops (O.C.C.B.).

The role of the employee / counsellor is to help the student evaluate her situation and assist her in acquiring the help the student feels she needs. This may range from psychological counselling to sacramental reconciliation.

*"Human understanding of God's will is often imperfect so it can happen that someone who acts against the teaching of God and the Church, even in serious matters, may not be committing sin. One may not have "sufficient knowledge" and one's sense of values may not be sufficiently developed to be fully responsible for one's actions. Moreover, immaturity, psychological imbalance, and habit can also diminish freedom and hence the deliberate character of an act, so that it is not always a serious fault."*²

At the same time, the fact that one's knowledge or sense of values are inadequate does not make the deed right or justifiable. There is truth to be sought in all moral questions, and it is the responsibility of all human beings to bring their consciences into harmony with the truth.

A pregnant teenaged student may be under great pressure from prevailing attitudes in society, from her peer group, from her own feelings of distress, and even from her family, who may advise her to have an abortion, and who may even threaten serious repercussions if she does not. It is possible for a student with appropriate support from educators, peers, and / or family, to resist such pressures. At the same time, a student who has chosen to have an abortion can be helped to evaluate her action, and to perceive the extent to which her knowledge, freedom, and/or deliberation were impaired by circumstances.

SUMMARY

1. A student who has had an abortion has a right to absolute confidentiality and to compassionate support and counselling.
2. Traditional Catholic moral teaching recognizes that both objective and subjective factors must be considered in evaluating actions.

6. FOR THE EMPLOYEE UNTRAINED IN COUNSELLING

A student who is pregnant or fears that she is pregnant or a student who has fathered a child, and who has confided in an employee of the Wellington Catholic District School Board will need sound counselling both during the pregnancy and after.

The employee in whom the student has confided may or may not be a trained and experienced counsellor. Employees who fall into the latter category should;

- be thoroughly conversant with this document and its intent.
- be aware that crisis counselling is delicate and demanding and one must be realistic about his / her ability to provide such counselling over an extended period of time.
- be aware that the Principal, Guidance Counsellor or Chaplain would be happy to provide advice on how to handle the situation. This can be done confidentially without revealing the student's name.

- in time, when and if appropriate, encourage the student to include a trained counsellor to the circle of confidentiality. In such a case if it is acceptable to the student, the employee and the counsellor should work in concert, each supporting the student in the ways appropriate to their relationship.
- be aware that the young woman will need medical attention and advice as soon as possible.

7. POST-PREGNANCY COUNSELLING

When a pregnancy is disclosed, it is obvious that the student has an urgent need for support and counselling. The need for support and counselling may not be as obvious after the pregnancy. Employees who worked with the student and the father of the child during the pregnancy should continue to make contact and if needed, provide for counselling.

The following are some of the reasons why ongoing counselling and support may be needed:

- the stress of school work while caring for an infant may be overwhelming for the student.
- if adoption was chosen by the teen mother, she may require support and counselling as she deals with post-adoption feelings of loss, bereavement or other concerns that she might have if she “second guesses” her decision.
- if there has been a miscarriage, it may be important that the student have someone in the school environment that she can speak to as she deals with her bereavement.

8. COUNSELLING THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT

While pregnancies occur more frequently in secondary schools, they can and do occur in elementary schools in Ontario. What has been suggested in this document regarding counselling of the student who is pregnant, also applies in the case of a younger student. There are, however, issues that should be of special concern when working in the elementary school environment.

The level of anxiety of the elementary school student will likely be even more intense than that of the secondary school student. Even greater sensitivity and skill in counselling may be required of the employee.

It is possible that someone who becomes sexually active at such a young age may not have a great deal of family support (or may think she does not). If this is the situation, the employee may wish to solicit the assistance (with the student's permission) of persons or agencies (e.g., Parish Priest, Principal, Chaplain, Guidance Counsellor, Public Health Nurse, C.A.S. etc.) in dealing with the family.

Once the pregnancy becomes public knowledge, the parents of other students will likely express concern. The principal and senior administration will need to be prepared to address these concerns.

Due to the young age of the other students in the school there may or may not be reactions to the pregnancy that need addressing after it becomes public knowledge. We cannot anticipate every possible scenario in this document. Employees of the Board, however, should be attentive to student reaction that may need attention. Employees should bring the matter to the attention of the principal who will determine if, when, and by whom an intervention will be made.

References

1. *Guidelines for Family Life Education*,
Canadian Conference on Catholic Bishops, 1987, p.9, no. 42.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994, no. 186 1.

This document was written with the help of the York Region R.C.S.S. Board Student Pregnancy Document and the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Student Pregnancy Document. We express our thanks and appreciation to these two boards and the writers of their documents.

Appendix “A”

Abortion

(From: Guidelines for Family Life Education, Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987, p. 13.)

64. Human life created in God's image and likeness remains a gift from God and from conception to death demands the utmost respect as the most basic value in society.
65. “From the time that the ovum is fertilized a life is begun which is neither that of the father or the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his or her own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already” (Declaration on Procured Abortion, AAS 66, 1974, 73-747, No. 12).
66. So, “from conception, life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (Vatican II, The Church Today 51.)

Appendix “B”

Objective and Subjective Moral Standards

(From: Guidelines for Family Life Education, Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987, p. 13.)

37. Morality, of course, does not depend solely on good intentions. It must be determined by objective standards (cf Vatican 11, *Gaudium et Spes* 5 1). For example, stealing, the unjustifiable taking of another person's goods, is morally wrong. Even if the conscience of the thief tells him that stealing is good (his subjective moral standard), stealing in itself is wrong (the objective moral standard).
38. The objective moral standard is given to us to foster the welfare and happiness of individuals and society. We should note that the expectations of Jesus, as contained in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), present us with the objective call of God to Christian living.
39. When the Church speaks of sexual intercourse outside marriage as something gravely wrong, she is only proclaiming the word of God (cf 70-72). It is God, the author of life, who warns us that the practice is against family life, harms persons, and offends God. So it is evil in itself and not just because the Church says so. This is the *objective moral standard*. It is the standard of good and evil, right and wrong as put into the very nature of things by God's creation and reaffirmed by Jesus.
40. However, it may happen that people are not fully and clearly aware of God's will in a particular matter. Their judgment about the goodness or the badness of an act is made according to their conscience at a given moment. This judgment of conscience may or may not conform to the objective moral standard of God's laws taught by the Church, but it will be always the response of the individual conditioned by all the influences which have come to bear on one's moral formation. This is the *subjective moral standard*.
41. A person stands to suffer from the effects of violating an objective standard even though, subjectively, he or she may not be fully culpable. Someone who destroys a town's water supply, whatever the degree of culpability, will go thirsty.
42. In this context, Catholic family life education must teach two extremely important things:
 1. Human understanding of God's will is often imperfect, so it can happen that someone who acts against the teaching of God and the Church, even in serious matters, may not be committing sin. One may not have “sufficient knowledge” and one's sense of values may not be sufficiently developed to be fully responsible for one's actions. Moreover, immaturity, psychological imbalance and habit can also diminish freedom and hence the deliberate character of an act so that it is always a serious fault.
 2. But the measure of correct moral conscience is outside of and superior to the human person, it is the will of God. So it is the duty of the Christian community and of each individual person to strive for a deeper understanding of the divine will so that the voice of moral conscience (subjective moral standard) reflects more and more perfectly the judgment of divine will as taught by the Catholic Church (objective moral standard). “In the formation of their consciences the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church” (Vatican11, *Religious Freedom* 14).
43. So one task of Catholic family life education is the progressive formation of consciences. It is not only among the young that we find those whose understanding differs from the law of God as taught by the Church, but also among parents, teachers and clergy. We must all -even the most intelligent- humbly admit that our understanding of the law of God in this or any other matter is constantly in need of growth and purification.

44. The definitive cornerstone of this whole edifice of conscientious judgment is the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church. It is by study, guided by faith and prayer, that our judgment approaches the divine will proclaimed through the teaching of the Church.