

L533: Library Materials for Children and Young Adults (Fall, 2002)**Group Project: Censorship Debate**

- Assigned to challenge a public library over the titles *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Go Ask Alice*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *The Witches*
- Statement prepared by Krista Brix and Abbie Anderson

We feel that the books that we have challenged in this debate contain material that warrants adult supervision for reading by children and teens. Current research in brain development, the effects of depicted violence, and the consequences of sexual attitudes and early sexual activity combine to support our views.

Recent studies have shown that the adolescent brain has not fully developed in important areas affecting the ability to reason and make judgments. The limbic area of the brain, which acts as a filter for emotional activity, is inundated with stimuli in the teenage brain. The prefrontal cortex, however, which is the seat of reasoning and decision-making, is virtually silent in teens. In the adult brain, the prefrontal cortex answers the output of the limbic area, effecting a balance between sensation and action. Just when teens are experiencing rapid emotional development—when their limbic areas are experiencing intense stimulation—their ability to draw accurate conclusions and make appropriate decisions is significantly impaired due to the immaturity of the prefrontal cortex. In other words, adolescents can take in scenes of violence or sexuality in these books, and be strongly affected by them, but they are not yet fully equipped to consistently make proper judgments and decisions based upon what they see, feel, and imagine.

Although research into the effects of violence on young people has focused on visual media such as television, film, and video games rather than books, we find that the

conclusions drawn in these studies apply equally well to the imagination stimulated by printed material.

Dr. Donald E. Cook, M.D (president of the American Academy of Pediatrics), and Dr. Daniel B. Bornstein (president of the American Psychiatric Association), testified in Congress in 2001 to support a bill that would restrict violent television programming during hours when young people make up a large percentage of the viewing audience. According to these professionals, repeated exposure to violent imagery desensitizes young people, and increases the risk of violent behavior. This concurs with the findings of a current American Psychiatric Association report, which concluded that heavy exposure to TV violence is a significant cause of societal violence.

We conclude that it is not a large leap to connect books containing graphically violent and sexually explicit material, which encourage the reader to imagine the acts in detail, with the harm that has been shown to come to young people exposed to graphic media such as television programming and video games.

Two of the books that we have challenged include significant representations of teenage sexual activity. Go Ask Alice does not explicitly describe sex acts, but frequent allusions to the main character's sexual activity carry the potential to influence young readers. While the narrator's sexual behavior is used as a negative symbol to illustrate her drug-addicted degradation, it never appears to have any real consequences beyond her anxiety that she might become pregnant (which she never does). Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings also contains references to Maya and her brother Bailey engaging in unprotected sex in their teens. Readers of this autobiography are given not only a graphic rape scene, but Maya's deliberate teenage seduction of a young man in her

neighborhood. When Maya becomes pregnant, she considers this a good thing, and seems delighted to be a single teenaged mother.

According to studies done over the last several years by Katherine Atwood of the University of Kentucky School of Public Health, teens are highly influenced in their decision to have sex by the assumption that the majority of their peers are already doing so. Despite this perception, in reality statistics show that a minority of young teens is sexually active. The false idea that “everyone is doing it” is a major prompt for young people to engage in the behavior themselves. Teens who believe that their peers are having sex are 2.5 times more likely to try it. Harold Leitenberg of the University of Vermont has found in his research that the younger a girl is when she first has intercourse, the greater her risks of problems with alcohol use, drug abuse, truancy, and even suicide attempts. The examples of early sexual activity in Go Ask Alice and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings can clearly have a serious impact on young people.

Another obvious effect of teens engaging in sex, particularly without using birth control, is unintended pregnancy. According to statistics presented by U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher in his 2001 Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior, adolescents are among three groups of women with the highest number of unintended pregnancies, along with low-income women and women of African descent. Unplanned pregnancies increase the risks for low birth weight, infant mortality, welfare dependency, and child abuse and neglect. A teenager who becomes pregnant faces few good choices. Terminating the pregnancy can carry physical as well as emotional risks, as safe abortion clinics become harder to find and to use; if she keeps the child, she often must drop out of school to care for her baby, curtailing her education

and her future opportunities for self-sufficiency. Clearly, there can be a myriad of long-term negative effects for a young person who inadvertently becomes pregnant, which affect not only the young mother but also her child and the society at large.

Exposure to violence and to assumptions of easy sexuality obviously have an impact on children and young adults, an impact we would be foolish to overlook when we enter the library. We have demonstrated that current research supports our view that the books we have challenged in this debate contain material that can be harmful or at least misleading to the young people in our families and in our communities. The consequences are not limited to the psyches of those young people alone. All of us suffer when children suffer, and all of us pay the price when young people make destructive decisions.