

## Risky Sex and the Adolescent Brain:

### *Implications for School Counseling Programs*

Recently, neuroscience has begun to give us a better understanding of the high-risk habits of teenagers. According to the *Family Therapy Networker*, a magazine for marriage and family therapists (1), adolescents' reckless experimentation represents more than a struggle to individuate.

During adolescence, psychobiologists say, the brain actually undergoes a profound remodeling. The prefrontal neural cortex, which functions as the brain's command center, loses nearly half of its neural connections. Subsequently decision-making "shifts toward brain regions that are governed by emotional reactivity."

These massive changes, says psychobiologist Linda Patia Spear, predispose adolescents to take more risks. At the same time there is a drop in the brain's dopamine level, which decreases the ability to experience pleasure. As a result, teens are powerfully drawn toward destructive behaviors such as drinking, taking drugs and experimenting with risky sex.

Dr. Spear's finding converges with the latest news from San Francisco, where new HIV infections have more than doubled in the last three years as safe-sex practices are being abandoned. In Los Angeles and five other cities, says the *Los Angeles Times*, one in ten young gay or bisexual men is infected with HIV (2).

Among young gay African-Americans living in large cities, according to another report, the infection rate is even more alarming: one man out of every three is HIV-positive (3). The Los Angeles County Health Services Department interviewed 53 HIV-positive gay and bisexual men and found that half of them, despite their HIV status, "had sex in public places such as bath houses or clubs with multiple partners without informing their partners of their status. Some did not use condoms." An AIDS Project Los Angeles survey similarly found that 31% of 113 bisexual men continued to engage in risky behavior, "even after being informed of their HIV-positive status."

In another article, the *Times* reported that the rate of rectal gonorrhea among gay and bisexual men in San Francisco rose 44% during a recent three-year period, while in Los Angeles, new syphilis cases among gay and bisexual men rose more than 1,680% (4).

San Francisco is considered to be a "bellweather for sexual activity among gay men" around the nation, predictive of trends nationwide.

NARTH's Joseph Nicolosi commented on the latest findings. "These two news items have particular significance," he said. "We now have evidence that the adolescent brain leads teenagers into high-risk behavior, and that young gays are increasingly engaging in unsafe sex.

"Taking both findings together, it would seem that educators should seriously reconsider the wisdom of introducing sexually questioning teenagers into the gay community through school-based programs.

"Schools work hard to keep underage students from obtaining cigarettes and alcohol. They should also understand the wisdom of postponing the adolescent's exposure to a very, very high-risk lifestyle."

— by Linda A. Nicolosi

#### Endnotes

- (1) "The Adolescent Brain: A Perilous Renovation," *Family Therapy Networker*, January / February 2001, p. 15.
- (2) "L.A. Studies Show Increase in Risky Sex by Gay Men," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 17, 2001, p. 11.
- (3) "Young Gay Black Men Suffer High HIV Rates," *Associated Press*, Feb. 6, 2001.
- (4) "HIV Rate Rising Among Gay Men in San Francisco," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 25, 2001, p. A3.

### Wanted: Expert Witnesses

NARTH is currently soliciting applications from professionals who are available to serve as expert witnesses in court cases.

Issues that present themselves from time to time involve gay parenting, homosexuality, transsexualism, transgenderism, child custody, and same-sex partnership and marriage legislation. If you are familiar with the scientific literature, please make us aware of your availability.