

Workshop Set to Attack Problems of Youth and Sex

By MARIA SCRIVANI

A soaring teen-age pregnancy rate and epidemic venereal disease are two factors prompting the "Understanding Adolescent Sexuality" workshop September 25 and 26 in Northwest Community Center, 155 Lawn Ave., sponsored by United Youth Services - West Side.

"It's a major problem nationally, and Erie County reflects the national statistics," says Mary Jane Szydlowski, a community educator at Planned Parenthood, who is one of the workshop coordinators.

The program is designed to train youth workers. "The staffs of many agencies could use training in this area," says Ms. Szydlowski. "When you work with young people, you can encounter a lot of serious problems regarding sexuality, ranging from teen-age pregnancy to more subtle problems like peer pressure about sex."

The City of Buffalo, she adds, has "an extremely high infant mortality rate." With more teen-agers having babies, she says, both the infant mortality



REV. GARY BAGLEY

and maternal mortality rates are likely to rise.

INCLUDED IN the workshop program is a keynote address by Dr. Sol Gordon, professor of Child and Family Studies and director of the Institute for Family Research and Education at Syracuse University.

Among the topics to be discussed during the seminar, are communication skills; crisis counseling; incest and sexual abuse; teen-age prostitution; problems of the adolescent rape victim, and adolescent homosexuality.

"Adolescents have a lot of misinformation about birth control," says Ellen Christensen, director of the Sexuality Center at State University of Buffalo, who will lead a workshop session on birth control and responsible sexuality.

She takes issue with those who say that sex education leads to problems.

"Instead of adding to the decay of morals in our society, it adds to the moral strength," Ms. Christensen says. Adolescents who are given information become more responsible, she believes. "It can lead to a knowledgeable choice, and informed adolescents can make that choice."

Participants in her workshop will learn a series of exercises designed to help adolescents and young adults examine their values and share myths and fears.

"It's a myth that 'everybody's doing it,' because they're NOT," says Ms. Christensen. Group interaction, she adds, can help young people see that others also are fearful and unsure and perhaps this support from peers can give them the courage to say no.

MAGGIE ROCHE, a public health social worker for the Erie County Health Department



ELLEN CHRISTENSEN

who will lead the session on sexuality awareness for helpers — those who work with adolescents — points out that adolescents have special problems.

"There are usually other things going on — they're pretty much in a state of confusion; sexuality is another one of the developmental crises they're going through."

She notes that helpers should be aware of three points in dealing with anyone regarding sexuality: the attitudes and feelings of the client toward sexuality; specific knowledge (facts and behavior patterns), and interpersonal communications (including the helper's own self-concept).

"Most people don't have enough knowledge about their sexual selves to protect themselves," says Ms. Roche.

"THE ONLY KIDS you hear about today are the kids who've acted irresponsibly," says the Rev. Gary Bagley, associate youth director for the Catholic Youth Department and chair of a workshop panel on religious and cultural attitudes toward sexuality.

"I think there are a number of young people who are handling their sexuality very responsibly and very morally."

Adolescent sexuality problems often are tied up with feelings of loneliness and a need for affection, he says.

"It's easy to confuse sexuality and affection — when the real hunger is for affection and attention."

Part of the problem may be rooted in American culture, he suggests.

"Touching is a solid form of communication. But our culture is somewhat less tactile than others. I think there's a need for affection among our young people ... when they don't get it, every form of physical affection becomes romantic." Touching and hugging should be seen as a form of human communication, but here it's seen in sexual terms, so young people "fall in love" — or think they've fallen in love — easily, Rev. Bagley adds.

For more information on the workshop, call Mary Jane Szydlowski at 853-1771.