Ann Landers’s Advice and the Sexual Revolution

As an advice columnist writing during one of the most tumultuous times in American history, Ann Landers’s column provided a place where teenagers could turn to get advice without being lectured or ignored. Over forty percent of Landers’s mail coming from teenagers who felt like they had no one else to turn to. The Sexual Revolution was a decade full of emerging sexuality and a changing culture as the traditional values of the earlier generation shifted to the “free love” mentality of the 1960s. As an advice columnist writing during the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, Ann Landers’s greatest achievement was educating and advising teenage girls on all matters of sex as they struggled with their lack of knowledge and sexual education during a time that promoted promiscuity.

The rapidly changing values and culture of the 1960s can be attributed to many different factors, but one event that sparked the shift from the traditional values of the 1950s to the “free love” mentality of the 1960s was the reduction of the obscenity laws and the effect it had on mass media. In 1873, Congress passed the Comstock Laws, otherwise known as the obscenity laws, which banned any form of erotic materials, including books, magazines, newspapers, pictures, etc. The problem with this law was that it failed to specify “obscene.” The obscenity law was tested throughout the early 20th century with limited success until the Alberts and Roth cases of 1957. During these cases, the Supreme Court qualified obscenity as any work that “appealed to a prurient interest in sex…was patently offensive because it affronted contemporary community standards… and utterly without redeeming social value.” By 1966, the controversial book Naked Lunch was ruled as an expression of free speech rather than obscenity, effectively

3 Allyn, Make Love, Not War, 66.
ending the censorship law on books.\(^4\) This had an immediate effect on the literary industry, as hundreds of sexually provocative books were being published and reproduced.\(^5\)

The relaxation of the obscenity laws was seen not only in books, but in the burgeoning sexuality of movies, television shows, magazines, and songs.\(^6\) The “sexual liberation” of the mass media fueled the Sexual Revolution as sexuality became an intrinsic part of the American culture. Advertisements became geared toward young teenage girls, urging them to be “pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, and deferential to men.”\(^7\) These messages were backed by the images in pornography and magazines like *Playboy*, which portrayed young women as sexual objects.

This “sexual liberation” had an immediate impact on teenagers, who were in a unique position in this time, as they were raised by parents who grew up in more “sexually repressed” time periods, and yet had all the pressures of being a part of a “sexually liberated” society.\(^8\) The world was changing with the reduction of the obscenity censorship and the increased sexuality in mass media; suddenly, sex was everywhere. Female teenagers, in particular, had a hard time dealing with the sudden shift from the “traditional” values that they were taught by their parents to the “free love” mentality of the 1960s. They began to struggle with their lack of sexual education in a culture that scorned the virtues and morality of the earlier generations in favor of eroticism and promiscuity. As a result, they turned to their one constant source of knowledge and information: Ann Landers.

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\(^4\) Ibid., 70.
\(^5\) Ibid., 71.
\(^8\) Ibid., 14.
Ann Landers’s advice column was the one place that teenagers could turn to get advice. Hundreds of letters started much like this one: “Dear Ann Landers, I am a girl of 15 and I live with my grandmother. She would just die if I tried to talk to her about this….” 9 Ann Landers’s column provided a place not only for teens to ask for advice and solutions to their problems, but to give advice to each other and to learn from other people’s mistakes. As one girl put it, “Many teen-agers have no one to confide in. Your column is a wonderful place to unload without fear of humiliation or embarrassment. We also learn a lot from kids who have made mistakes and written to say so.” 10

When looking through the letters Ann Landers received in the 1960s, it becomes clear that the teenage girls were struggling with the pressures of their sexually charged culture and their lack of basic sexual knowledge. 11 Landers made it her business to not only steer the girls through the rapidly changing culture, but also help them learn from each other’s mistakes, and to educate them on all matters of sexual activity, including the pill, promiscuity, pregnancy, and venereal disease. Not only did she address each of these issues numerous times in her column, but she devoted an entire book to discussing teenage sexuality, titled *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers about Sex.*

Unsurprisingly, one of the most talked about sexual topics among her teenage girl writers was the birth control pill. While there had been many forms of birth control leading up to the 1960s, they were largely ineffective and potentially dangerous. When the birth control pill was licensed by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, it came at a time when medicine was

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becoming increasingly popular to solve personal problems.\textsuperscript{12} The impact of an oral contraceptive was immediate and widespread, as the pill “promised to erase fear and anxiety, to make sex simple and contraception discreet.”\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps the biggest impact of the pill was the sexual freedom it gave to women.\textsuperscript{14} For the first time, there was an effective and medically approved way to prevent pregnancy. This sexual freedom contributed to the shift from a society where reputation was everything into a culture where sexual activity was not only accepted but encouraged by mass media. In response to the sexualized portrayal of women in the media, a concerned father wrote to Landers, asking if there were any girls left who considered themselves real people instead of playthings or sex objects.\textsuperscript{15} Landers published three letters from girls who declared to be holding out instead of putting out. Their responses show how difficult it was to hold out against the pressure of a sexualized society. One girl replied, “It is not easy to hold out in this world of rapidly changing values. The old concepts of morality are not as universally accepted as they once were. Too often they fall flat when challenged by space-age arguments for sexual involvement.”\textsuperscript{16}

While there were girls who decided to hold on to the traditional morals and values, there were even more girls that liked the freedom that came with the pill. One high school girl wrote to say that she believed in “free love” and didn’t see a problem in sleeping around with different boys as long as she liked them.\textsuperscript{17} She goes on to describe virginity as “an old-fashioned idea that makes no sense anymore.”\textsuperscript{18} Many teens agreed with her and saw nothing wrong with leaving behind the constricting morals and values of the older generation and embracing the sexualized

\textsuperscript{12} Allyn, \textit{Make Love, Not War}, 33.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{15} Landers, “Ask Ann Landers”.
\textsuperscript{16} Landers, “Ask Ann Landers”.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
culture of the 1960s. In a similar letter, a college girl wrote to Landers, stating that “fear of pregnancy no longer prevents the modern female from enjoying sex on the campus – or anywhere else. Birth control pills are readily available”.19

Unfortunately, even though the FDA approved the birth control pill and it became the most common form of birth control, misconceptions about the pill were rampant, especially among teenagers. One popular belief among the teenagers was that the pill was one hundred percent effective. In one letter, a sixteen-year-old girl wrote about her sexually active friend. When she asked her friend what she would do if she got pregnant, the friend laughed and said “The pill never fails.”20 Landers responded by telling of the letters she received from other girls who believed the same thing until the doctor told them they were pregnant.21

Landers frequently received letters informing her of the failure of birth control, and each time she informed them of her stance: the pill is for married couples who take it properly under the care of a doctor.22 When Planned Parenthood wrote to Landers, angry at the implication that the pill fails to give contraceptive protection, Landers responded to inform them of misconceptions surrounding the pill. According to Landers, many teenagers were under the impression that taking the pill before they go out will prevent conception for twenty-four hours and had no idea that there were any possible repercussions from taking the pill.23 These misconceptions about birth control were just examples of the lack of sexual education among teenagers that Landers stood up and addressed.

Along with birth control, another popular topic among the teenagers was pregnancy. The letters asking for advice on teenage pregnancy ranged from those who wanted to learn more

21 Landers, “Ann Landers Answers Your Problems.”
23 Landers, "Pill Designed for Marriages."
about the educational aspect to the teenage girls who just found out they were pregnant and didn’t know what to do. One fifteen-year-old even wrote to ask Ann if it was possible for a girl to get pregnant if she has all her clothes on.\textsuperscript{24} Out of all the topics about teenage sexuality, Landers stood firm on her belief that there should never be premarital sex for this very reason: sex leads to babies. Whenever she gave advice about premarital sex, she talked mainly to the girls, because like it or not, girls get pregnant, boys don’t.\textsuperscript{25} Every time a girl wrote to Landers with a pregnancy scare, she used it as an opportunity to promote the advantages of foregoing premarital sex.

One eighteen-year-old girl wrote to Landers asking why it’s wrong to have sex when they both respect each other and plan to be married.\textsuperscript{26} Typical of the traditional value system that she came from, Ann Landers replied that having premarital sex violates the moral code and is dangerous because then it is still possible for the two people to change their minds and don’t marry.\textsuperscript{27} She claimed that having sex outside of marriage wasn’t “worth the fear, the guilt, the loss of reputation, the anxiety, and the risk of pregnancy.”\textsuperscript{28} Letters from hundreds of girls regretting their premarital sex experience served as evidence to back up her advice. Dozens of letters read much like this one, “I went too far and now I’m sorry. I’m almost out of my mind with worry. I think I’m pregnant….\textsuperscript{29}

Rather than lecturing the girls for something they already did, Landers used her columns and her books to encourage women to have self-respect. “The girl who has respect for herself considers her body personal property. It belongs to her. She is responsible for what happens to it.

\textsuperscript{24} Landers, "Teenager Needs Help from Ann."
\textsuperscript{26} Landers, "Ann Landers Answers Your Problems," \textit{Saskatoon Star-Phoenix} (Saskatoon, Sask), October 9, 1965.
\textsuperscript{27} Landers, "Ann Landers Answers Your Problems,"
\textsuperscript{28} Landers, \textit{Since You Ask Me}, 162.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 162.
She doesn’t let a boy use her as a plaything.”30 She urged the girls to be civilized, mature and self-disciplined.31 Unfortunately, many girls ignored her advice, and more often than not, when she received a letter from a teenage girl, there was a good chance she just found out she pregnant and wasn’t sure what to do about it.

In 1968, seventeen percent of all births in the U.S. were to mothers between fifteen and nineteen years of age.32 Teenage pregnancies in the 1960s usually ended up in one of three ways: abortion, marriage, and adoption. Abortion at this time was illegal and highly dangerous, but Ann Landers was outspoken in her advocacy for reforming the archaic abortion laws. Landers firmly believed that government should not be allowed to force a woman into having a baby if the pregnancy could be safely terminated.33 For the most part, though, even though these pregnancies were occurring during the Sexual Revolution, a time that promoted a shift away from the old traditional values, the answer to a pregnancy out of wedlock was marriage.

Throughout the 1960s, around one-third of the women who married were between the age of fifteen and nineteen years old.34 Most of these marriages were disastrous, as the only reason the kids got married was to prevent the child from being illegitimate. A typical example of one of these teenage marriages is seen in this letter from a twenty-two year old woman. In the letter, she explains how she once fully believed in the idea of “free love.” She was married at seventeen when she was three months pregnant. “Bill and I have been married three years and have been separated five times. I started divorce proceedings six months ago… I am so tired of sex I could scream. It used to be the beginning and end of the world and now I hate the thought of it.”35

30 Ibid., 161.
31 Landers, "Ann Landers Answers Your Problems,"
34 Teenagers: Marriages, Divorces, Parenthood, and Mortality, 2.
35 Landers, "Free Love Helps?,"
Unable to give much advice after everything has taken place, Landers wrote booklets, such as *Necking and Petting – and How Far to Go*, and her book, *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers about Sex*, in an effort to prevent premarital sex and unplanned pregnancies. Her thought was that if kids knew how far to go and when to stop, they would be better prepared to know what to do in sexual situations. Anything she wrote would have been better than nothing, as there was little to no sexual education in the schools or even available in a public setting. This was a huge risk for her, as many people in this time period considered sexual education to be promoting premarital sex. Nevertheless, Landers proceeded to write the booklets, going into detail about what all is included in necking and petting, and giving advice on when to date and if you should be going steady as a teenager. She firmly believed that no teenager should be going steady, because that usually led to multiple necking sessions, which led to having sex. She has received countless letters from girls going steady who feel pressured into having sex because of it. Her book was very popular, as she refrained to talk to teenagers as if they were kids and gave them the details they needed to know, all while emphasizing the importance of waiting to have sex until marriage.\(^{36}\)

Her attempt to give straight talk to teenagers about sex resulted in hundreds of letters from outraged parents. One mother called Landers an “evil influence on young people” and wrote about her intention to write to every clergyman she knew so that they could write and set Ann straight. Far from letting this bring her down, Landers responded by listing the responses from five clergymen from different denominations, all praising her common sense approach to talking to teenagers about sex.\(^{37}\)

\(^{36}\) Landers, *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex*, 29.

\(^{37}\) Landers, "Ann Landers Answers Your Problems,"
Another one of Ann Landers’s biggest achievements when talking about teenage sexuality was discussing and giving advice on venereal disease. Out of all the topics related to sex, the teenagers were the most ignorant about venereal diseases. In 1965, the results of a syphilis study in the U.S. showed that there was a chain reaction in the spread of syphilis among teenagers and that syphilis and gonorrhea constituted fifty percent of all reported communicable diseases.\(^38\) As the most susceptible to the diseases, the teenagers were the least equipped to recognize symptoms.\(^39\) Despite efforts to get an education program started in the high schools, the letters written to Ann Landers show how teenagers were appallingly ignorant about the symptoms and treatments of VD. Even the Public Health Report admitted that the “ignorance and misunderstanding concerning the facts about the venereal diseases are still very common, even in educated and enlightened circles.”\(^40\)

Given the rise of venereal diseases and the severe lack of education, it’s no wonder the teenagers were writing to Ann Landers, asking about VD. The ignorance about the diseases was widespread and alive among a variety of people. One fourteen-year-old girl wrote to Ann, telling her that she didn’t know anything about venereal disease and was wondering if a person could get VD by kissing a member of the same sex.\(^41\) Another misconception had a nineteen-year-old girl saying, “I didn’t know teenagers got VD. I thought it was an adult’s disease.”\(^42\) More than one teenager wrote a letter similar to this one, “I just couldn’t have a venereal disease because I’ve gone all the way with only one boy and he’s my steady. He’s a very refined young man and comes from a well-to-do and prominent family. He couldn’t have given me anything like that.”\(^43\)


\(^{39}\) Lenz, "Controlling Venereal Disease through," 997.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 998.


\(^{42}\) Landers, *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex*, 66.

\(^{43}\) Landers, *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex*, 70.
The lack of education about sexual diseases has given most teenagers completely wrong ideas about what venereal diseases are, how they are transmitted, and what the symptoms and treatments are. In an attempt to correct the lack of education, Ann Landers first brought up venereal diseases in one of her columns, simply telling the teenage girl to go to the doctor if she suspects she has a venereal disease. That one small act cause a major backlash as she received hundreds of letters, both applauding her and slandering her for speaking out about something so taboo as venereal disease.

Far from letting that stop her, less than a month later a reader wrote in asking more details about the symptoms, and Ann explained more about it. She broke down the differences between gonorrhea and syphilis and went into detail about how each showed symptoms differently in males and females. She continued to describe the treatments and how to know when to go to the doctor. Yet again, she choose to put the education of her readers before the safety of her job, which received hundreds of letters bashing her for discussing venereal diseases in a family newspaper. She responded by going into even more detail by putting a chapter about it in her book *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers about Sex*.

Landers explained that the term “venereal disease” usually refers to gonorrhea and syphilis, but there are also three other less common types: chancroid, lymphogranuloma venereum, and granuloma inguinale. With syphilis, it is possible to detect it early and get treatment before it becomes a truly dangerous disease. Usually, if a person is able to detect the sore, called a chancre, then they can get treatment and get rid of the disease. If not, then it is possible for them to go through both stages of syphilis and have continual recurrences.

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44 Landers, "Ignorant about V.D."
45 Landers, “Ask Ann Landers.”
47 Landers, *Ann Landers Talks to Teenagers About Sex*, 73-75.
Gonorrhea is much more difficult to diagnose, especially for girls as there is no pain, only a discharge from the sex organs.\textsuperscript{48} If diagnosed early, it can be treated with penicillin, although for chronic cases, the treatments are much more intense.\textsuperscript{49}

Landers then went on to talk about the best ways to receive protection from VD and how the disease is spread from person to person. Her advice for protection against VD is simple: avoid heavy necking, which can lead to having sex.\textsuperscript{50} If teens believe they might have VD, she suggests telling their parents. However, knowing that many teens wouldn’t dream of telling their parents this, she also suggested going to a family physician or to the county health department.\textsuperscript{51} By giving teens all the information they need to diagnose, prevent, and treat VD and refusing to give up, Landers provided the education about venereal diseases to anyone who wanted to learn about it and helped prevent teenagers from passing it on without their knowledge.

Throughout her columns, booklets, and books, Ann Landers strove to provide advice and education to the teenage girls struggling to accept the new culture of the Sexual Revolution. However, one of the best ways she was able to pass on advice wasn’t to give it herself or to write it in a book. It was to provide a place for teenagers to talk to each other, responding to each others’ letters and using personal experience to help someone from making that same mistake. One such letter came from an eighteen-year-old girl who was pushed into believing the “free love” hype that said a girl had to have a boyfriend to have fun. She was so excited to have a boyfriend that she did anything he asked. After six months, he told that it was the end of their

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 70-78.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 78.
relationship because he met a “100 percent pure, clean living girl” and he wanted to marry her. It didn’t matter that she was pure when they met, only that she wasn’t then.52

Another teen wrote to give advice to anyone who was thinking about having premarital sex. “The best advice I can give (and believe me, today I’m an authority) is for a girl to save herself not for her steady boyfriend – or for her fiancé – but for her husband. A high flying, free and easy approach to love is a hollow and meaningless substitute for the real thing.”53 As much as these girls wanted and needed advice from Ann Landers, the advice they gave one another was just as important, and sometimes even more effective. It’s one thing for Landers to say that something bad will happen if you have premarital sex, but another thing altogether for a teenage girl to give her own personal account of the way her life fell apart by making the mistake of premarital sex.

Because Ann Landers was willing to go where no one else would, she was able to teach millions of teens about sex, both the good and the bad. While she did not condone premarital sex, she was willing to take the time to go explain why it was bad and how far it was okay to go before stopping. While many people, especially parents, saw this as teaching them what to do and condoning sex, she saw it as practical. The most she does is explain what necking and petting are and how petting ruins your reputation, leads to guilt, and can possibly end in making babies.54 Necking, as she describes it, goes on “from the neck up”55, and for those parents who saw this as teaching them what to do, she had her own practical comeback, “if you think your teenager isn’t going in for a little necking, it’s time you woke up and smelled the coffee.”56

While the parents may have been upset, someone had to teach these kids, and Ann Landers was

54 Landers, Since You Ask Me, 158.
55 Ibid., 156.
56 Ibid., 157.
able to do it without talking down to them and understood them enough that they listened to her. Her influence can be seen in this letter from this woman, who started reading Landers when she was twelve, “Believe it or not, Ann Landers, every decent idea I ever learned about sex came from you. I learned what NOT to do from the letters and answers you printed. I also learned how to answer boys when they got fresh. I actually memorized some of your sentences and they helped me out of many a spot.”57

As an advice columnist writing during the Sexual Revolution, Ann Landers was in the unique position of watching the teenage girls trying to transition from the traditional values that they were raised on to the newly sexualized culture of the 1960s. These girls, more than anyone, were affected by sexuality that sprung to life during the Sexual Revolution. Advertisements used the girls’ vulnerability and lack of sexual knowledge to change their perspectives of women in the media. From the moment the censorship law was lifted, the image of women as sexual objects subservient to a man’s wishes was displayed across books, songs, movies, pornography, and advertisements. As a result of this shift into a sexualized culture, the teenagers struggled to deal with their inexperience and lack of sexual education during an era that promoted eroticism and promiscuity. As Landers says in her book, “Small wonder our teen-agers get a cockeyed view of morality when such garbage can find a ready market in some of America’s ‘best’ newspapers.”58

Although Ann Landers wrote about a large variety of subjects, her greatest achievement during the tumultuous years of the 1960s was helping teenage girls acclimate to a newly sexualized society by advising and educating them on sexuality. Landers was the only person willing to discuss all aspects of teenage sexuality, including promiscuity, birth control,
pregnancy, abortion, and venereal diseases. Even though the media was becoming more focused on sexuality, sexual education was still a taboo topic in the school and home. By talking about it in her column, Landers opened the door for open communication between teenagers and their parents and provided accurate information about basic sexual education facts. Her column touched thousands of young women, educating them and giving them the self respect and determination to overcome the pressures of the Sexual Revolution.
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