

GLAMOUR

Sex Ed, Unfiltered: How Actress Jessica Biel and Activist Sandra Pelletier Are Helping Women Understand Their Bodies

When Jessica Biel and Justin Timberlake decided they were ready to have a baby two years ago, Biel went off birth control. “Now what happens?” she wondered. “I’ve been on the Pill for so long; how hard will it be to get pregnant?” She found herself curious about other basic facts: When should you have sex if you want to conceive—and if you don’t? “Suddenly I realized I really didn’t know what’s going on inside my own body,” says the actress, 33. “It was shocking.”

When Biel met Sandra Pelletier, founder of the nonprofit health care organization WomanCare Global, she confessed her ignorance—and the two couldn’t stop talking. Pelletier, 46, the mother of an eight-year-old son, grew up in Caribou, Maine, where “for girls, life was all about who they married and how many kids they were going to have,” she says. “Understanding how their body worked to make those choices wasn’t talked about.” Since then she’s become a leader in getting contraceptives and other feminine-care products to women in the developing world: After learning, for example, that 10 percent of African girls drop out of school because they lack menstrual protection, she launched Project Dignity to donate reusable menstrual cups (worn instead of a pad or a tampon) to 50,000 girls in places like Ethiopia and Cambodia. But only recently did she focus on the need for information in this country. “More than half of our nation’s pregnancies are unplanned, and just 22 states require public schools to teach sex education,” says Pelletier, who’s also CEO of the biotech company Evofem. “Jessica and I realized we can help change this.” Sometimes, says Biel, “you have to have the courage to stand up for what you believe in.”

The two new friends are now launching a series of online videos that will cover everything from puberty to contraception (watch them at womancareglobal.org). Things like menstruation and the Pill are hardly popular causes for a celebrity to take on, but Biel, who gave birth to Silas Randall Timberlake in April, remembers how embarrassed she was when she got her period in fifth grade: “I was in a school play, wearing a gray beard and this pad the size of a skateboard and thinking, What is happening to me?” she says. “We want girls to know what their [body is going through] so they don’t feel scared or ashamed or gross.” To get the message out, Biel explains, “we share girl stories, fears, and insecurities. The tone is informative but also goofy, smart, witty.”

The videos are just the beginning. Pelletier plans to use various platforms and any way possible to reach more girls and reduce unwanted pregnancies. “I’m thrilled,” says Ginny Ehrlich, CEO of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “We need to get young adults this information in a variety of ways.” Says Pelletier: “There is power and dignity in understanding your body.”

