

What the Research Shows: Helping Teens Make Healthy and Responsible Decisions about Sex

Evidence shows that sexuality education that stresses the importance of waiting to have sex while providing accurate, age-appropriate, and complete information about how to use contraceptives effectively to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can help teens make healthy and responsible life decisions. Yet there is currently no federal program dedicated to supporting this approach. Instead, since 1996, the federal government has funneled more than a billion dollars into abstinence-only-until-marriage programming, even in the face of clear evidence that these programs do not work.

Below is a review of recent research on the issue of sexuality education:

Giving teens the information they need to make responsible life decisions about sex helps teens delay sex and protect their health.

- ? A nationwide study of 15-19 year olds found that teens who participated in sexuality education programs that discuss the importance of delaying sex and provide information about contraceptive use were significantly less likely to report teen pregnancies than were those who received either no sex education or attended abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

Pamela K. Kohler, RN. et al., *Abstinence-Only and Comprehensive Sex Education and the Initiation of Sexual Activity and Teen Pregnancy*, Journal of Adolescent Health, Spring 2008.

- ? A review of 115 sex education programs found that curricula that stress waiting to have sex and provide information about using contraception effectively can significantly delay the initiation of sex, reduce the frequency of sex, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom or contraceptive use among teens.

Douglas Kirby, Ph.D. et al., *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, November 2007.

- ? The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention note that “research has clearly shown that the most effective programs [to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS] are comprehensive ones that include a focus on delaying sexual behavior *and* provide information on how sexually active young people can protect themselves.”

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, *Fact Sheet: Young People at Risk: HIV/AIDS Among America's Youth*, National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, March 2002.

Parents want schools to teach comprehensive sexuality education and do not think taxpayer dollars should be spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

- ? More than 85 percent of Americans believe that it is appropriate for school-based sex education programs to teach students how to use and where to get contraceptives.

National Public Radio, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, *Sex Education in America*, January 2004.

- ? Seventy percent of Americans oppose the use of federal funds for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that prohibit teaching about the use of condoms and contraception for the prevention of unintended pregnancies and STDs.

Advocates for Youth and SIECUS, "Americans Oppose Abstinence-Only Education Censoring Information on Contraception," 1999.

Studies show that most abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are ineffective, and some show that these programs deter teens who become sexually active from protecting themselves from unintended pregnancy or STDs.

- ? A rigorous, multi-year, scientific evaluation authorized by Congress presents clear evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs don't work. The study, which looked at four federally funded programs and studied more than 2000 students, found that abstinence-only program participants were just as likely to have sex before marriage as teens who did not participate. Furthermore, program participants had first intercourse at the same mean age and the same number of sexual partners as teens who did not participate in the federally funded programs.

Christopher Trenholm et al., *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs*, Princeton: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., April 2007.

- ? A review of program evaluations in 11 states (AZ, CA FL, IA, MD, MN, MO, NE, OR, PA, WA) indicates that after participating in abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, teens are less willing to use contraception, including condoms. And in only one state, did any program demonstrate any success in delaying the initiation of sex.

Debra Hauser, *Five Years of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education: Assessing the Impact*, Advocates for Youth, September 2004.

- ? Some abstinence-only-until-marriage programs include "Virginity Pledges," whereby teens sign cards promising to remain virgins until they are married. While data suggests that under limited circumstances, teens who sign a pledge may delay sexual intercourse, 88 percent still have sex before marriage. Research also shows that pledgers' rate of STDs does not differ from the rate of nonpledgers and that pledgers are less likely to use condoms at first intercourse or to be tested for STDs than nonpledgers.

Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman, "After the promise: the STD consequences of adolescent virginity pledges," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 36 (2005) 271-278.

A recent congressional report found that widely used federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula distort information, misrepresent the facts, and promote gender stereotypes.

- ? More than 80 percent of the abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula reviewed contain false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health.
- ? The curricula reviewed misrepresent the effectiveness of contraceptives in preventing STDs and unintended pregnancy. They also contain false information, blur religion and science, promote gender stereotypes, and contain basic scientific errors.

"The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs," Prepared for Rep. Henry A. Waxman, United States House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform – Minority Staff, Special Investigations Division, December 2004.