

Should abstinence education be discontinued?

Since November's election, organizations like Planned Parenthood, the American Social Health Association, and SEICUS are demanding that federal funding for "abstinence-until-marriage" education programs be eliminated.

Their latest tactic is to insist that since most unmarried adults are sexually active then federal funding for abstinence education programs targeting teenagers should be discontinued. We believe it is ludicrous to compare adults' behavior to teenagers'. Because many adults smoke, we should stop educating teens about reasons for abstaining from tobacco?

Even now, federal, state and local governments spend about \$12 to promote comprehensive sex education or "safe sex" programs for every \$1 spent to encourage abstinence until marriage. Nonetheless, proponents of "safe sex" want every penny.

Consider some of the consequences of premarital sexual activity. Every year, millions of teens contract sexually transmitted diseases, and tens of thousands conceive a child and then face a future of potential long-term poverty and welfare dependence.

In addition, the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health found that sexually active females were more than three times as likely to be depressed, and nearly three times as likely to have attempted suicide. Among males, those who were sexually active were more than twice as likely to be depressed and six times as likely to have attempted suicide.

Recently, many media outlets reported the findings of an Alan Guttmacher Institute study that just-so-happens to be the research arm of national abstinence education opponent Planned Parenthood. It is fair to say that this study may not have been scientifically valid because its sample of adults included those who had not married by their 40's. This is not a normative group since the average age of marriage is 25 for women and 27 for men.

Since the late 1990's, federally funded abstinence education has been targeting early and older adolescents, not adults. And sexual activity among adolescent populations has been reduced. There has been a drop in premarital sex from 54% to 46% among high school students from 1990 to 2002. That translates into roughly 1.5 million fewer young Americans at risk of pregnancy, unwed parenthood, and sexually transmitted diseases, not to mention emotional heartbreak.

Locally, an evaluation of St. Vincent Hospital's abstinence education program entitled The PEERS Project by Kenneth Ferraro, Ph.D., Purdue University, revealed significant changes in all measures of knowledge about the value of preserving sexual activity until marriage. Changes occurred among all racial and ethnic groups, and for a wide range of beliefs and dispositions. PEERS' curriculum that is taught by positive high school role models also increased student responsibility in recognizing the long-term consequences

of pregnancy on status attainment. A decline in the number of births to 15 to 19 year olds from 1998 to 2004 occurred in 29 out of 32 counties in Indiana that use PEERS' intervention.

We believe the number of teens who choose to wait would be even higher if more of them received consistent messages from their peers about reasons for waiting and skills for forming healthy relationships.

Before Congress appropriated funding for abstinence education as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, America's birth rate *increased* 67 percent among 15-19 year olds from 1970-1996, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute.

Further evidence that abstinence education is working is a research study's analysis of the pregnancy and birth rates among 15-19-year-olds from 1991 to 1995. This study, published in *Adolescent and Family Health Journal*, found that the entire decrease in the out-of-wedlock birth rate and 67 percent of the decline in pregnancy rate were due to an increase in abstinence from sexual activity, rather than from increased contraceptive use.

The difference between this study and a well-publicized contradictory report is that the latter did not separate married and non-married teens which biased the conclusions. Accurate data analysis suggests it was because adolescents were finally taught an unambiguous message about the reasons for saving sex for marriage, the negative consequences of premarital sexual activity, and skills for forming healthy relationships, that adolescent birth rates dropped 35 percent between 1991 and 2005. And since the late 1990's until the present, the majority of teens have not engaged in sexual activity.

Sincerely,
The PEERS Staff