

The Value of Teaching Abstinence

A recent report published by the Heritage Foundation states that when adolescents are educated regarding abstinence and consequently pledge to maintain their virginity, they have lower rates of out of wedlock births. (Heritage Foundation, by Kirk A. Johnson, Center for Data Analysis Report #04-04, March 30, 2004)

According to released data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, young women who take a virginity pledge are about 40 percent less likely to have a child out of wedlock when compared to similar young women who do not make such a pledge. These dramatic findings are sustained when background factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, religiosity, and other relevant variables, are held constant. This finding strongly suggests the potential for abstinence education programs to reduce teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock childbearing.

These findings are consistent with prior research on the potential impact of virginity pledge programs. Young people who make deliberate public pledges to remain virgins are likely to substantially delay the initiation of sexual activity, have fewer sexual partners, and are more likely to marry. These behaviors, in turn, are likely to lead to lower rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing. The current findings strongly suggest that abstinence education programs that clearly encourage young people to delay sexual activity can potentially have a significant effect on youth behaviors and life outcomes.

In the last decade, abstinence education programs have become increasingly popular. The most effective abstinence programs teach adolescents:

- The primary importance of delaying sexual activity;
- That human sexual relationships are predominantly emotional and moral rather than merely physical in character; and
- That teen abstinence is an important step leading toward a loving marital relationship as an adult.

Authentic abstinence education is a character-based holistic approach which encompasses not only physical health, but considers all aspects of the “whole person”, linking love, commitment, and intimacy while dealing with long-term emotional and moral aspects of sexuality. It is “directive education” in that students are taught that abstinence is an achievable and valuable goal, and is clearly the best choice.

In a report entitled “The Effectiveness of Abstinence Education Programs in Reducing Sexual Activity Among Youth” written by Robert E. Rector for the Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder #1533, April 8, 2002, (excerpted here in part) Rector lists 10 studies or evaluations that demonstrate the effectiveness of abstinence education programs in reducing teen sexual activity. Several additional studies demonstrating the effectiveness of abstinence education are being completed or are under review at academic journals. The findings in this paper add to the growing evidence substantiating the potential effectiveness of abstinence education as a means to positively change youths' behavior. (To avoid confusion for those who wish to reference the Heritage document, the numerical notations for the footnotes in this section are consistent with the original report.)

Evidence of Effective Abstinence Programs

There are currently 10 scientific evaluations (described below) that demonstrate the effectiveness of abstinence programs in altering sexual behavior.¹⁸ Each of the programs evaluated is an authentic abstinence (or what is conventionally termed an "abstinence only") program; that is, the program does not provide contraceptives or encourage their use.

The abstinence programs and their evaluations are as follows:

1. **Virginity Pledge Programs.** An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* by Dr. Michael Resnick and others entitled "Protecting Adolescents From Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health" reveal that "abstinence pledge" programs are dramatically effective in reducing sexual activity among teenagers in grades 7 through 12.¹⁹ Based on a large national sample of adolescents, the study concludes that "Adolescents who reported having taken a pledge to remain a virgin were at significantly lower risk of early age of sexual debut."²⁰

In fact, the study found that participating in an abstinence program and taking a formal pledge of virginity were by far the most significant factors in a youth's delaying early sexual activity. The study compared students who had taken a formal pledge of virginity with students who had not taken a pledge but were otherwise identical in terms of race, income, school performance, degree of religiousness, and other social and demographic factors. Based on this analysis, the authors discovered that the level of sexual activity among students who had taken a formal pledge of virginity was one-fourth the level of that of their counterparts who had not taken a pledge. Overall, nearly 16 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys were found to have taken a virginity pledge.

2. **Not Me, Not Now.** Not Me, Not Now is a community-wide abstinence intervention targeted to 9- to 14-year-olds in Monroe County, New York, which includes the city of Rochester. The Not Me, Not Now program devised a mass communications strategy to promote the abstinence message through paid TV and radio advertising, billboards, posters distributed in schools, educational materials for parents, an interactive Web site, and educational sessions in school and community settings. The program sought to communicate five themes: raising awareness of the problem of teen pregnancy, increasing an understanding of the negative consequences of teen pregnancy, developing resistance to peer pressure, promoting parent-child communication, and promoting abstinence among teens.

Not Me, Not Now was effective in reaching early teen listeners, with some 95 percent of the target audience within the county reporting that they had seen a Not Me, Not Now ad. During the intervention period, the program achieved a statistically significant positive shift in attitudes among pre-teens and early teens in the county. The sexual activity rate of 15-year-olds across the county (as reported in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey²¹) dropped by a statistically significant amount from 46.6 percent to 31.6 percent during the intervention period. Finally, the pregnancy rate for girls aged 15 through 17 in Monroe County fell by a statistically significant amount, from 63.4 pregnancies per 1,000 girls to 49.5 pregnancies per 1,000. The teen pregnancy rate fell more rapidly in Monroe County than in comparison counties and in upstate New York in general, and the difference in the rate of decrease was statistically significant.²²

3. Operation Keepsake. Operation Keepsake is an abstinence program for 12- and 13-year-old children in Cleveland, Ohio. Some 77 percent of the children in the program were black or Hispanic. A 2001 program evaluation, involving a sample of over 800 students, found that "Operation Keepsake had a clear and sustainable impact on...abstinence beliefs." The evaluation showed that the program reduced the rate of onset of sexual activity (loss of virginity) by roughly two-thirds relative to comparable students in control schools who did not participate in the program. In addition, the program reduced by about one-fifth the rate of current sexual activity among those with prior sexual experience.²³
4. Abstinence by Choice. Abstinence by Choice operates in 20 schools in the Little Rock area of Arkansas. The program targets 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students and reaches about 4,000 youths each year. A recent evaluation, involving a sample of nearly 1,000 students, shows that the program has been highly effective in changing the attitudes that are directly linked to early sexual activity. Moreover, the program reduced the sexual activity rates of girls by approximately 40 percent (from 10.2 percent to 5.9 percent) and the rate for boys by approximately 30 percent (from 22.8 percent to 15.8 percent) when compared with similar students who had not been exposed to the program. (The sexual activity rate of students in the program was compared with the rate of sexual activity among control students in the same grade in the same schools prior to the commencement of the program.)²⁴
5. Virginity Pledge Movement. A 2001 evaluation of the effectiveness of the virginity pledge movement using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health finds that virginity pledge programs are highly effective in helping adolescents to delay sexual activity. According to the authors of the study:

Adolescents who pledge, controlling for all of the usual characteristics of adolescents and their social contexts that are associated with the transition to sex, are much less likely than adolescents who do not pledge, to have intercourse. The delay effect is substantial and robust.²⁵

The study, based on a sample of more than 5,000 students, concludes that taking a virginity pledge reduces by one-third the probability that an adolescent will begin sexual activity compared with other adolescents of the same gender and age, after controlling for a host of other factors linked to sexual activity rates such as physical maturity, parental disapproval of sexual activity, school achievement, and race. When taking a virginity pledge is combined with strong parental disapproval of sexual activity, the probability of initiation of sexual activity is reduced by 75 percent or more.

6. Teen Aid and Sex Respect. An evaluation of the Teen Aid and Sex Respect abstinence programs in three school districts in Utah showed that both programs were effective among the students who were at the greatest risk of initiating sexual activity. Approximately 7,000 high school and middle school students participated in the evaluation. To determine the effects of the programs, students in schools with the abstinence programs were compared with students in similar control schools within the same school district. Statistical adjustments were applied to further control for any initial differences between program participants and control students. The combined programs were shown to reduce the rate of initiation of sexual activity among at-risk high school students by over a third when compared with a control group of similar students who were not exposed to the program.²⁶ Statistically significant changes in behavior were not

found among junior high students.

When high school and junior high school students were examined together, Sex Respect was shown to reduce the rate of initiation of sexual activity among at-risk students by 25 percent when compared with a control group of similar students who were not exposed to the program. Teen Aid was found to reduce the initiation of sex activity by some 17 percent. A third non-abstinence program, Values and Choices, was found to have no impact on sexual behavior.

7. Family Accountability Communicating Teen Sexuality (FACTS). An evaluation performed for the national Title XX abstinence program examined the effectiveness of the Family Accountability Communicating Teen Sexuality abstinence program in reducing teen sexual activity. The evaluation assessed the FACTS program by comparing a sample of students who participated in the program with a group of comparable students in separate control schools who did not participate in the program. The experimental and control students together comprised a sample of 308 students. The evaluation found the FACTS program to be highly effective in delaying the onset of sexual activity. Students who participated in the program were 30 percent to 50 percent less likely to commence sexual activity than were those who did not participate.²⁷
8. Postponing Sexual Involvement (PSI). Postponing Sexual Involvement was an abstinence program developed by Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, and provided to low-income 8th grade students. A study published in Family Planning Perspectives, based on a sample of 536 low-income students, showed that the PSI program was effective in altering sexual behavior.²⁸ A comparison of the program participants with a control population of comparable low-income minority students who did not participate showed that PSI reduced the rate of initiation of sexual activity during the 8th grade by some 60 percent for boys and over 95 percent for girls.²⁹ As the study explained:

The program had a pronounced effect on the behavior of both boys and girls who had not been sexually involved before the program.... By the end of eighth grade, boys who had not had the program were more than three times as likely to have begun having sex as were boys who had the program.... Girls who had not had the program were as much as 15 times more likely to have begun having sex as were girls who had had the program.³⁰

The effects of the program lasted into the next school year even though no additional sessions were provided. By the end of the 9th grade, boys and girls who had participated in PSI were still some 35 percent less likely to have commenced sexual activity than were those who had not participated in the abstinence program.³¹

9. Project Taking Charge. Project Taking Charge is a six-week abstinence curriculum delivered in home economics classes during the school year. It was designed for use in low-income communities with high rates of teen pregnancy. The curriculum contains these elements: self-development; basic information about sexual biology (anatomy, physiology, and pregnancy); vocational goal-setting; family communication; and values instruction on the importance of delaying sexual activity until marriage. The effect of the program has been evaluated in two sites: Wilmington, Delaware, and West Point, Mississippi. The evaluation was based on a small sample of 91 adolescents. Control and experimental groups were created by randomly assigning classrooms to either receive or

not receive the program. The students were assessed immediately before and after the program and through a six-month follow-up.

In the six-month follow-up, Project Taking Charge was shown to have had a statistically significant effect in increasing adolescents' knowledge of the problems associated with teen pregnancy, the problems of sexually transmitted diseases, and reproductive biology. The program was also shown to reduce the rate of onset of sexual activity by 50 percent relative to the students in the control group, although the authors urge caution in the interpretation of these numbers due to the small size of the evaluation sample.³²

10. Teen Aid Family Life Education Project. The Teen Aid Family Life Education Project is a widely used abstinence education program for high school and junior high students. An evaluation of the effectiveness of Teen Aid, involving a sample of over 1,300 students, was performed in 21 schools in California, Idaho, Oregon, Mississippi, Utah, and Washington. The Teen Aid program was shown to have a statistically significant effect in reducing the rate of initiation of sexual activity (loss of virginity) among high-risk high school students, compared with similar students in control schools. Among at-risk high school students who participated in the program, the rate of initiation of sexual activity was cut by more than one-fourth, from 37 percent to 27 percent. A similar pattern of reduction was found among at-risk junior high school students, but the effects did not achieve statistical significance. The program did not have statistically significant effects among lower-risk students.³³

Conclusion

Authentic abstinence education is essential to reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing, preventing sexually transmitted diseases, and improving emotional and physical well-being among the nation's youth. These programs help young people develop an understanding of commitment, fidelity, and intimacy that will provide the foundation for a future healthy marital life.

Abstinence education programs have repeatedly been shown to be effective in reducing sexual activity among their participants. However, until recently, funding for the evaluation of abstinence programs has ranged from meager to nonexistent. Currently, the number of adequately funded evaluations is increasing, and several promising new evaluations are nearing completion. In the future, it is expected that the number of evaluations demonstrating the effectiveness of abstinence education will steadily increase.

Abstinence education is a nascent and developing field, as substantial funding has only become available within the past few years. As abstinence programs develop and become more broadly implemented, future evaluations will enable the programs to hone and increase their effectiveness.

10 Effective Programs - Pertinent Footnotes

18. Most of the programs in this section show reductions in sexual activity that are statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level and above. The significance of these studies is indisputable. In addition, a few studies show programs with positive effects in reducing sexual activity, but with statistical significance levels in the 90 percent to 94 percent confidence range. Because they fall short of the 95 percent confidence level, each of these studies viewed in isolation might be dismissed as inconclusive. Yet, viewed in conjunction with each other, the existence of multiple studies based on small samples, each showing the positive effects of abstinence programs in reducing sexual activity with tests of statistical significance slightly below the 95 percent confidence level, offers evidence reinforcing the case for the overall effectiveness of abstinence education.

19. Michael Resnick, M.D., et al., "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 278 (September 10, 1997). The effects of a virginity pledge in reducing sexual activity were statistically significant at the 99.9 percent confidence level.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 830.
21. L. Kahn et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Survey--United States 1997," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*, Vol. 47 (SS-3), 1998, pp. 1-89.
22. Andrew S. Doniger, "Impact Evaluation of the 'Not Me, Not Now' Abstinence-Oriented, Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Communications Program, Monroe County, New York," *Journal of Health Communications*, Vol. 6 (2001), pp. 45-60. Both the shifts in attitudes and the decline in sexual activity rate over the intervention period were statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The difference in the rate of decline in adolescent pregnancy in Monroe County, when compared to other geographic areas, was statistically significant at the 95 percent to 99 percent confidence levels.
23. Elaine Borawski et al., *Evaluation of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs Funded through the Wellness Block Grant (1999-2000)*, Center for Health Promotion Research, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, March 23, 2001. The program effects on sexual activity were significant at the 93 percent confidence level.
24. Stan E. Weed, *Title V Abstinence Education Programs: Phase I Interim Evaluation Report to Arkansas Department of Health, Institute for Research and Evaluation, October 15, 2001*. The effects of the program in reducing the onset of sexual activity were statistically significant at the 98 percent confidence level. (Data on statistical significance are not currently included in the written report but were provided separately to the author by the evaluator, Dr. Stan Weed.)
25. Peter S. Bearman and Hanna Bruckner, "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (January 2001), pp. 861, 862. The effects of a virginity pledge were shown to be statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.
26. Stan E. Weed, *Predicting and Changing Teen Sexual Activity Rates: A Comparison of Three Title XX Programs*, report submitted to the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 1992. The effects the programs on at-risk high school students were significant at the 99 percent confidence level.
27. Stan E. Weed, *FACTS Project: Year End Evaluation Report, 1993-1994*, prepared for the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programs.
28. Marion Howard and Judith Blarney McCabe, "Helping Teenagers Postpone Sexual Involvement," *Family Planning Perspectives*, January/February 1990, pp. 21-26.
29. These effects were statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.
30. Howard and McCabe, "Helping Teenagers Postpone Sexual Involvement," p. 24.
31. These effects were statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.
32. Stephen R. Jorgensen, Vicki Potts, and Brian Camp, "Project Taking Charge: Six-Month Follow-Up of a Pregnancy Prevention Program for Early Adolescents," *Family Relations*, October 1993, pp. 401-406. The effects of the program in reducing the rate of onset of sexual activity were statistically significant at the 94.9 percent confidence level. The effects of the program on specific areas of knowledge were significant at the 95 percent confidence level and above.
33. Stan E. Weed, Jerry Prigmore, and Raja Tanas, *The Teen Aid Family Life Education Project: Fifth Year Evaluation Report*, Institute for Research and Evaluation, 1992. The effect of the program on the sexual activity of high-risk high school students was statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.
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