

Benefits of Delaying Sexual Debut

Executive Summary

Today's adolescents have an array of challenges before them that previous generations never faced. Fifty years ago, there were only a handful of STIs; today, sexually active teens are at risk for acquiring over two dozen. At the same time, the age at first marriage has steadily risen by 20-25 percent, cohabitations have increased 6.5 times, and sex before wedlock has become the norm, not the exception. If that's not enough, combine the 24 hour media circus with a billion dollar internet pornography industry, Victoria's Secret at every shopping mall, and Hollywood's sex-saturated messages broadcast in your living room, and you have a sex-on-demand culture being digested by our children every day.

As this review of literature shows, the range of benefits that postponing sex offers young people is scientifically proven, but in order for adolescents to embrace this message, these concepts need to be communicated effectively and often within public education. Surveys indicate that parents desire an abstinence message for their children; however, U.S. culture is simply not reinforcing this value, making it difficult for youth to understand the reasons why they should wait for sex. Thus, educational strategies should focus on the following conclusions that can be drawn from the benefits of delaying sexual debut.

Premarital sex has a negative impact on the physical health of adolescents, and typically hurts girls more than boys. Although sexually active young men are at risk to acquire STIs, females (especially younger girls) are more vulnerable to these infections because of their biological makeup. Girls are also more likely to suffer physical abuse in sexual relationships, and research indicates that adolescent females have a higher probability of contracting an STI when their romantic partner is substantially older. Typically, girls do not report using condoms as consistently as boys; and neither gender's brain is developed enough to make reasoned, future-oriented decisions about contraception. Girls also tend to pay a much higher price than boys when it comes to teenage pregnancy, as they are often left to carry and raise the child on their own.

Some of these physical consequences may also play a role in the psychological health outcomes of sexually active youth. For example, adolescent girls who are abandoned

by their boyfriend after learning of a pregnancy may become depressed with the prospect of raising a child alone. Women also tend to make more of an emotional investment in romantic relationships, which could lead them down the path of seeking love through sex; this in turn may result in the vicious cycle of repetition/compulsion. On the other hand, boys typically suffer psychological symptoms only when combining sexual activity with other high risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use; and both genders are more likely to think about and commit suicide if they have initiated sex, especially those at a young age. However, if young people wait to have sex until marriage, they avoid these risks, and stand to benefit from the social and financial advantages that abstinence offers.

One of the best social outcomes that results from abstinence is the occurrence of healthy relationships. When adolescents choose to wait, they avoid premarital sexual bonds with other partners. This in turn makes them far less likely to get involved in cohabitations, which is a major risk factor for future marital infidelity and divorce. Healthy marriages also benefit the well-being of each spouse (especially men), and provide a nurturing environment for children.

Another social benefit that stems from abstinence is increased financial stability. When adolescents avoid childbearing outside of marriage, they are able to focus their attention on educational pursuits and future careers, without having to sacrifice the time and money that a family demands. Although research has not demonstrated a clear causal relationship between early sex and delinquency, many studies show that when teenagers abstain, they are less likely to get enmeshed in a problem behavior syndrome that includes poor academic performance, substance use, and other risk behaviors. It may very well be that abstinence acts as a protective barrier, insulating teenagers from an array of harmful behaviors that have the potential to create future problems.

Although the data is not clear for every single outcome, research does demonstrate that delaying sexual debut has a significant impact on the physical, psychological, financial, and social health of young people. Parents and policy makers alike should continue to embrace abstinence as a primary message for sexual education, develop strategies based upon the existing data, while building upon new research that continues to evolve in adolescent sexual health.

