
The Failures of the Abstinence-only Education to Curb Teenage Pregnancy in the United States

Abstinence Education and Teen Sexual Health

Beginning as an effort to curb teenage pregnancy rates, abstinence-only education has come to dominate the American public school system. Abstinence supporters have used the general drop in teenage pregnancy to justify these programs, despite the lack of empirical evidence supporting this correlation. In addition to the ineffectiveness and loose science of abstinence-only education, these programs carry a markedly religious agenda that ultimately affects the minds and self-esteem of the adolescents they target.

Support for abstinence-only education began with the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981. Commonly called the “Chastity Act,” this piece of legislature promoted abstinence as the only way to avoid sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV, and unplanned pregnancy. It limited funding for family planning services, and expressly forbade grants to projects that were in any way affiliated with abortion (Perrin and Bernecki). Almost immediately, the AFLA had issues of controversy raised against it. In 1983, a lawsuit was filed against the Act, claiming it violated the separation of church and state by endorsing a religious view of sexual education.

Only two years later, it was found to be unconstitutional by a district court judge. This decision, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court, and instead the Act had new stipulations imposed upon it. These included an absence of religious reference, a requirement of medical accuracy, a principle of self-determination regarding teenage contraceptive referral, and a prohibition of presenting programs in church sanctuaries during school hours (Perrin and Bernecki).

In 1992, the Senate made a decision to deny funding to the American Teenage Study on sexual behavior. This was in part caused by pressure from a group of conservative senators, though the Senate was warned that religion was being allowed to dictate law. These senators succeeded in casting the study as a “reprehensible” survey that was meant only to “legitimize homosexuality and other sexually promiscuous lifestyles” (Remez). This victory had a damning effect on the study of adolescent sexual activity, which has allowed the view that “sex” is only vaginal intercourse to continue.

In the late 1990’s, Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act added an “until marriage” stipulation to abstinence-only education (Perrin and Bernecki). Absent in the original Act

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concerning sexuality education, this clause in Title V is followed by others of a similar, suspiciously religious motif. Most notable of these are specific “standards” the Act imposes upon both teenagers and adults.

Abstinence until marriage is expected of the former, while a faithful, monogamous relationship “within the context of marriage” is expected of the latter (Perrin and Bernecki). The Act even goes so far as to claim that premarital sex will most likely result in physical or psychological damage. Indeed, the only positive aspect of Title V is a stipulation that programs will teach students how to decline sexual advances, as well as the dangers of drugs and alcohol in regards to sexual relations.

Interestingly, the abstinence-only programs that are taught in public schools today also have a tendency to go against the stipulations of the AFLA. In a 2004 study conducted by the House Government Reform Committee, many abstinence-only programs were found to teach false information, as well as blur the lines of religion and science (Alford). Some of these falsehoods include that women who have an abortion are more likely to commit suicide; up to 10% of women will become sterile from the operation; condoms fail as often as 31% of the time; and that pregnancy can result from touching another person’s genitals.

In spite of the inclusion of heinous misinformation in the curricula, the prevalence of this approach to sexuality education has risen dramatically over the last few decades. From 1988 to 1999, the percentage of sex education teachers that taught abstinence as the only way to avoid STDs and pregnancy jumped from 2% to 23%. Between 1995 and 2002, the number of students that received formal education about birth control dropped about 20% for both genders; and by 2002, a third of students of both genders had received no instruction about forms of birth control (Alford).

The federal government has provided more than 1.5 billion dollars for the funding of abstinence-only education since 1997. This funding has been greatly influenced by Evangelical Christian organizations, allowing these organizations to interject a belief that sexual activity outside of marriage is morally wrong. This source of funding blurs the line between church and state, and undoubtedly allows the religious references that were banned in the AFLA to slip through.

Even with the prevalence of abstinence-only education in American schools, these programs do not reflect the beliefs of the majority of the population. Around 92% of Americans believe in the teaching of contraception as a form of sexuality education, and 83% believe that protection against and prevention of STDs and pregnancy should be taught, regardless of whether the student is sexually active (Perrin and Bernecki).

The majority of teenagers themselves believe that abstinence-only education is ineffective. In

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fact, no solid evidence exists that abstinence-only education has any effect on the problems it targets. The few rigorous studies that have been done on abstinence education have failed to provide any proof of effectiveness, suggesting that abstinence-only education has no significant value (Perrin and Bernecki).

Another question to be addressed is what exactly is defined as “abstinence”? Abstinence-until-marriage programs only focus on vaginal intercourse, with no consideration given to other sexual but noncoital acts. This narrow definition of sex leaves gaping loopholes that abstinence-only education is unable and unwilling to address: oral sex, anal sex, and mutual masturbation.

As programs originally formed to address rising teenage pregnancy and birthrates, these gaps in material can be somewhat explained by the fact that acts such as oral and anal sex are unrelated to pregnancy. However, efforts to expand studies on these topics often hit the same political barriers as comprehensive sexuality education. Though this can be in part attributed to the perceived difficulty of convincing parents to talk about the sexual habits of their children, it also finds its base in political misgivings.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage education is not only ineffective, but does a psychological disservice to teenagers. In spite of the original stipulations imposed upon these programs that required them to be free of religious reference, abstinence education is mostly linked to and funded by religious groups. Many of these involve religious blackmail by either directly or indirectly communicating to young teens that God wants them to remain pure, or that they must remain pure for their future spouse. This is especially targeted at young girls, who are encouraged to maintain their virginity for their husbands.

But what about after marriage? The inclusion of “until marriage” in abstinence education implies an obligation to have intercourse with one’s spouse, and does nothing to dissuade illusions of what sex is actually like. This is where the shortcomings of abstinence-only education can really be seen.

With key concepts such as abstinence as the only way to avoid STDs and discouragement of condom use, heretofore-abstinent teens are given no information on how to deal with diseases they may contract from sex after marriage. With no comprehensive understanding of sexual activity, young couples are yet at risk for STDs, as well as pregnancies they are unprepared for or incapable of supporting.

Abstinence-only education perpetuates a lofty and uninformed expectation of sex that leads to disappointing, unhealthy, and potentially dangerous sex lives. Along with a deficient sexual education, the “promise of great [married] sex” (Gardner 185) that is used to bribe teenagers into abstinence does nothing to prepare them for the realities of sex and married life.

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With no understanding of the contraction of STDs or the prevention of pregnancy, and only the godly, unrealistic expectations of sex that they were taught, young people become trapped in archaic and unhappy relationships. After marriage, abstinence-only education does nothing but leave young couples to a fate that would have been completely avoidable, if not for an incomprehensive approach to sex.

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