



Advocacy Resource Guide



Making a Difference . . .

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

ISSUE IN BRIEF

Abstinence-only education programs are nothing new, they have existed for over 20 years. Under the Bush Administration, federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs have increased markedly, despite an overwhelming lack of scientific evidence that supports their effectiveness. Recent studies have shown that most of the curriculum used in AOUM programs misrepresent or use outdated information, perpetuate gender stereotypes, and flat out ignore medical fact.

Comprehensive sexuality education programs also present abstinence as a primary method of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prevention, but combine it with basic and accurate information regarding contraception. They also provide adolescents with religiously neutral views of sexuality and promote healthy relationships that utilize communication and don't rely on gender stereotypes. Abstinence only programs are dangerous and ineffective. Their funding should be withheld and curriculum transformed. Comprehensive sexuality education programs work toward delaying teenage sexual activity and should be made the norm in American schools.

Putting Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to Work

You can use Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to:

1. Urge local and state policymakers to address issues that are important to the health and success of today's youth.
2. Educate school administrators or health care officials about unique issues facing adolescents.
3. Engage with the media (e.g., in a letter to the editor or an interview) using effective language to frame an issue facing youth.
4. Present to funders on why they should invest in your work with or on behalf of youth.
5. Connect to more information on youth issues and other organizations advocating for youth.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Concern

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs have been around for over twenty years. However, under the Bush Administration federal support for them has expanded rapidly. In 2005, the federal government spent 170 million on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs; double that of which it spent in 2001. Bush had proposed legislation to expand funding to 270 million in fiscal year 2005. (Waxman, 2004) The danger of these programs can be found in their blatant religious bias and negligent omissions of vital information to adolescents. Comprehensive sexuality education programs also present abstinence as the primary method of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prevention, but combine it with basic and accurate information regarding contraception. However, they also recognize the futility and risks of avoiding these discussions. Additionally, comprehensive programs advocate neutral curriculum on topics such as sexual orientation, dating violence and gender roles.

“A sexual education program that lies or withholds the truth from an adolescent hinders their ability to make informed and responsible sexual decisions.”

In December 2004, Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-CA) released a report by the Committee on Government Reform's Minority Staff Special Investigations Division. In this report, Waxman evaluated the content of Special Programs of Regional and National Significance Community-Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS), the most popular abstinence-only curricula used by grantees of the largest federal abstinence initiative. He discovered program curricula that possessed a pervasive commitment to singularly religious beliefs, often exhibited in flagrant medical and/or scientific inaccuracies. A sexual education program that lies or withholds the truth from an adolescent hinders their ability to make informed and responsible sexual decisions. These programs are not interested in the best sexual or health interests of teens, only in promoting a limited view of “natural” sexuality and heterosexual marriage promotion.

Prevalence

Despite their twenty-year existence and continued financial support, no peer review study has ever found abstinence-only-until-marriage programs effective. Evaluations of state-funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs found no delay in first sex and no evidence of either short or long term impact. (McKeon, 2006). Moreover, Rep. Waxman's special investigation committee report of U.S. Department of Health & Human Services supported programs revealed that over 80% of them use curricula containing false, misleading, or distorted information about the effectiveness of contraceptives and the risks of abortion. His report also found gender stereotypes and religious beliefs treated as fact, as well as deliberate scientific errors. (Waxman, 2004)

A common argument against comprehensive sexuality education programs is that it promotes sexual activity and negative behavior. In reality, evaluations of these programs have revealed the opposite. Research regarding comprehensive sexuality education programs has reported high levels of behavioral and positive health impact, including: delayed first sex, reduction in the frequency of sex, decreased number of new partners and incidence of unprotected sex, and increased use of condoms or other contraceptives. (McKeon, 2006). Unfortunately, these programs are not eligible for federal funding because they educate about contraception.

The lack of funding runs counter to overwhelming public support for comprehensive sexuality education programs. Ninety-three percent of parents of middle school students and 91% of parents of high school students believe it is very or somewhat important to have sexuality education as part of the school curriculum. Parents of middle and high school students also highly support contraception and condom use education. Overall, 72% of middle school student parents and 65% of high school student parents believed that federal government funding “should be used to fund more comprehensive sex education programs that include information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraceptives” versus funding programs that solely focus on “abstaining from sexual activity”. (SIECUS, 2005).

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Impact on Behavior

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs marginalize those who do not fit their narrow scope of acceptability and place them even more at risk. They harm communities by promoting false and antiquated beliefs built on medical inaccuracy and gender bias. Adolescents who go through these programs are not supplied with the adequate information needed to make knowledgeable, responsible decisions. When caught in difficult or dangerous situations these adolescents are ill equipped to protect or defend themselves. They are also unable to discuss their issues with anyone out the fear and shame that these programs established around any sex that wasn't what they deemed correct or moral. Hence, the consequences of their mistakes are that much more extreme and devastating.

Funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs should be withheld and curriculum transformed. Comprehensive sexuality education programs work toward delaying teenage sexual activity and legislation such as the Responsible Education About Life Act (REAL) has a tangible chance of elevating the standard of sexuality education in American schools. Thus, this bill should be supported and adolescents given the information necessary to make their own responsible decisions.

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Healthy Teen Network makes the following recommendations in order to increase awareness about and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education programs. We strongly urge the creation of support services and funding that promotes or teaches age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.

Awareness

- ✓ HTN recommends and encourages widespread efforts to increase awareness about comprehensive sexuality education programs, and their ability to protect and empower adolescents with complete and accurate knowledge.
- ✓ HTN recommends and encourages a concrete, and universally upheld, definition of abstinence that includes other sexual activity besides penile-vaginal intercourse.

Education

- ✓ HTN recommends and encourages the teaching of developmentally and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, as it holds the greatest hope for reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy among adolescents.
 - HTN believes the teaching of abstinence is an integral part of comprehensive sexuality education.
 - HTN supports comprehensive sexuality education because it is research and evidenced-based, religiously neutral, and free of fear-based and shame-based strategies.
- ✓ HTN recommends ongoing training and professional development opportunities for those involved in teaching sexuality education because we believe comprehensive sexuality education should be taught by trained, qualified instructors.
- ✓ HTN recommends that all children and youth have access to information and clinical services that meet their age, developmental and reproductive health needs. This is especially important for sexually active adolescents and teen parents, for whom secondary prevention is critical.

Support Systems

- ✓ HTN encourages open communication between parents and teens on the issues addressed by comprehensive sexuality education
- ✓ HTN recommends that sexuality education be taught in a religiously neutral environment that encourages dialogue, conveys positive views of sexuality, and does not rely on shame/fear based strategies.

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Behaviors

- ✓ HTN is concerned about the absence of a common definition for abstinence and how that may negatively affect adolescents who believe they are practicing it, but are participating in other sexual behaviors besides penile-vaginal intercourse, which could lead to STIs, HIV and pregnancy.
- ✓ HTN recommends that all adolescents be taught:
 - How to use and where to get contraceptives.
 - A complete and accurate definition of abstinence.
 - To embrace non-heterocentric language and a more positive view of homosexuality.
 - About healthy relationships, gender roles, and dating/interpersonal violence.

Funding

- ✓ HTN recommends that all adolescent pregnancy prevention programs require high quality quantitative and qualitative evaluation that is mandatory, not voluntary, and adequately funded at not less than 10% of the project's total budget.
- ✓ HTN recommends increased funding for:
 - The proliferation of comprehensive sexuality programs.
 - Training sex education instructors.
 - Production of fact-based, age-appropriate educational resources including textbooks, handouts, videos, etc.
 - Lobbying for legislation that limits the amount of federal money awarded to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

DEFINITIONS

Comprehensive sexuality education: developmentally appropriate sexuality education which provides complete, positive, accurate information on human sexuality throughout a person's lifespan, including, but not limited to: anatomy, human reproduction, intimate sexual behaviors, healthy relationships, sexual risk reduction and pregnancy prevention strategies (including abstinence and contraception), gender roles and stereotypes.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs (AOUM): welfare reform legislation that defines "abstinence education" as an educational or motivational program which: teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children; teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems; teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity; teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects; teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents and society; teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.(The Federal Definition For Abstinence-Only Programs; Section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, P.L. 104-193)

RESOURCES

Sexuality Information and Education
Council of the United States
www.siecus.org

Sexual Health Network
www.sexualhealth.com

Advocates for Youth
www.advocatesforyouth.org

Teen Wire
www.teenwire.com

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Evidence-based: information that is supported by research, recognized as accurate and objective by leading medical, psychological, psychiatric, and public health organizations and agencies, and, where relevant, published in peer-reviewed journals.

Abstinence: not engaging in any activity that puts one at risk for sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy.

Religiously neutral: respecting all religious traditions while not preferring or promoting any one over another.

Fear-based strategies: educational/motivational strategies that use misinformation and exaggeration or present 'worst case scenarios' as the norm, for the purpose of scaring people from engaging in any activity that might put one at risk for sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy.

Shame-based strategies: educational/motivational strategies that have the effect of shaming people for personal choices made relative to sexual conduct and behaviors or the consequences of one's choices.

Responsible Education About Life Act (REAL): formerly the Family Life Education act would provide federal money to support responsible sex education in schools. This education would include science-based, medically accurate, and age appropriate public health information about both abstinence and also contraception. Introduced to Congress by Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) Referred to the Subcommittee on Health on 06/03/2005. (www.advocatesforyouth.org/real.htm)

ABOUT HEALTHY TEEN NETWORK

Healthy Teen Network (HTN) is a national membership organization that provides resources and services to professionals working in the field of adolescent reproductive health – specifically teen pregnancy prevention, teen pregnancy, and teen parenting.

Healthy Teen Network believes youth can make responsible decisions about sexuality, pregnancy and parenting when they have complete and accurate information, resources, and support that are culturally relevant and appropriate to their age, gender, and developmental stage.

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