



Abstinence-Only Education Fails Teens

Bristol Palin and Jamie Lynn Spears might have made news headlines as high-profile teen moms, but teenage motherhood is far from glamorous, as Palin is eager to admit. Of course, as the new spokesperson for Candie's Foundation, a teen pregnancy prevention organization that urges teens to practice abstinence, Palin is barred from discussing how contraception could have prevented her unplanned pregnancy.

In an ongoing project, the Feminist Women's Health Center in Atlanta has been collecting true stories behind unintended teenage pregnancies:

Ashley—whose name has been changed to protect her identity—was 16 in 1998 when she had sex with her 15-year-old boyfriend. “I was feeling desperate and alone because I didn't have a boyfriend for so long,” she said. “So I went ahead and had dry sex with him. I thought people don't get pregnant just from dry sex. Plus, he was the first I've ever done anything like that with.” She didn't realize that her boyfriend's semen had gone through the thin fabric of her underwear. She became pregnant.

Jenelle was a virgin when she met her boyfriend in 2000. Two weeks into the relationship, they had sex. She was not using birth control and she refused to use a condom “because they hurt.” A little over a week later, she found out that she was pregnant and that she had gotten Chlamydia from having unprotected sex.

The reality of teen sex

A study in 2006 found that 95% of Americans have sex before marriage. In fact, premarital sex has been the norm for several decades. Demanding that teens abstain from sex until they are married is a naive agenda. Programs should emphasize the benefits of abstinence while also equipping students with information about contraception.

In a 2004 Kaiser Foundation poll, 95% of parents of middle school students believed contraception was “an appropriate topic” for school sex education. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, which dominated throughout the last decade, therefore not only go against research showing their ineffectiveness, but also contradict public opinion.

Currently, 17 states do not require sex education of any sort in public schools. The fact that 50 percent of sexually active teenagers contract a sexually transmitted infection by the age of 25 makes this totally unacceptable. Even those students who do receive formal education about contraceptives often get it too late—after they've already had sex.

The United States has the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and teen birth in the industrialized world. According to a 2006 study by the Guttmacher Institute, 750,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant each year. And 82 percent of those pregnancies are unintended. American teens aren't more sexually active than their European counterparts. They are, however, far more likely to become pregnant.

Why abstinence-only-until-marriage is the wrong approach

A number of recent reports have found that federally funded abstinence-only programs are rife with inaccuracies and trite slogans. Many programs portray offensive, outdated gender stereotypes as scientific fact, grossly exaggerate contraceptive failure rates, and give incorrect information about how sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, are spread.

One curriculum receiving federal funds compares the use of condoms to a game of Russian Roulette—implying not only that condoms have a high failure rate (they don't), but also that condom use can lead to death. Another program uses a

clown to demonstrate that using a condom is like taking your chances laying beneath swords being juggled. And yet another tells people that “men tend to be more tuned in to what is happening today and what needs to be done for the future,” while women in the work force are “not as concerned” about preparing for the future.

The General Accounting Office has highlighted the fact that the federal agency responsible for doling out millions of dollars each year to these programs has no system in place to ensure that the information in these programs is accurate.

A recent study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. found that participants of “ab-only” programs were just as likely to have unprotected sex, to initiate sex at the same age, and to have just as many sexual partners as those not in the program. Predictably though, students of “ab-only” were far less likely to use contraceptives when they did have sex than were students of comprehensive programs.

In fact, not a single abstinence-only program showed any success in actually increasing abstinence among teens. “Recent behavioral data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveys from 2003-2007 suggests declines in teen condom and contraceptive behavior and little change in sexual activity,” said John Santelli, a professor at Columbia University who studies teenage sexual behavior. “Those data are consistent with the shift to abstinence-only approaches.”

The federal law governing abstinence-only programs prohibits the inclusion of any information about the benefits of contraceptives in preventing unwanted pregnancy and the spread of disease. The only mention of contraceptives is in a negative context.

In the real world, intentions to remain abstinent almost always fail. Dr. Janet Rosenbaum of Johns Hopkins University

The Responsible Education About Life (REAL) Act

The REAL act (H.R.1551 and S.611) would create a federally-sponsored grant program allocating \$206 million annually over five years, for states to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education programs in schools. Comprehensive sex education curricula include information on abstinence and contraception, as well as helping young people develop strong relationship and negotiation skills. It has 87 cosponsors in the House and 13 cosponsors in the Senate.

The Prevention First Act

The Prevention First Act (H.R.463 and S.21) contains the REAL Act, but also includes a range of other reproductive-health acts. It has 141 cosponsors in the House and 24 cosponsors in the Senate.

found that 82 percent of young people who take “virginity pledges” break them before getting married, and most deny that they ever made such a promise. Because they have never been given complete, accurate information about other ways to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease, they are far less likely to use a condom or other contraceptives than their non-pledging peers.

Wasteful spending

After more than a decade and \$1.5 billion of taxpayer money, there is no study that shows that abstinence-only programs are effective in reducing teen pregnancy. Indeed, a number of evaluations of federally funded programs show exactly the opposite—that they are a colossal waste of money, or worse, that they actually do harm.

When the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania examined federally funded abstinence-only programs in that state, it found that “taken as a whole, this initiative was largely ineffective in reducing sexual onset and promoting attitudes and skills consistent with sexual abstinence.” A survey of programs in Texas discovered that the percentage of students reporting having ever engaged in sexual intercourse increased for nearly all ages between 13 and 17, with teen births in the state costing taxpayers over \$1 billion a year. An evaluation of one program in Minnesota found that the number of participants who were sexually active doubled in just one year.

In 2006, the U.S. teen birth rate increased by three percent, after a 14-year decline. In 2007, the rate went up another one percent. National data show that 26 states saw their rates rise, with the highest increases in the South and Southwest regions of the country.

The failure of abstinence-only is one reason that 23 states plus the District of Columbia have refused to accept federal funding for abstinence-only programs. President Obama’s 2010 Budget proposal effectively eliminates \$177 million of funding for abstinence-only education and instead allocates \$170 million to a new Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative, which will be based on methods proven to reduce teen pregnancy.

Comprehensive sex education

South Carolina is currently the only state that requires that a certain number of hours—12.5 to be exact—be spent teaching sex education in its school system. Thanks in part to policies like the Comprehensive Health Education Act, which do not limit teachers to an abstinence-only curriculum, teen birthrates in the state fell 27% between 1991 and 2006. This mirrors a long record of success with comprehensive sex education programs. Researchers and doctors in Milwaukee, Wisconsin attribute the decline in the local teen birth rate—which hit its lowest level in 2007 since 1979—to awareness campaigns and greater accessibility to contraceptives.

The evidence is clear; it’s time to get real about sex education in this country.

What you can do

- Search <http://thomas.loc.gov> to find out whether your decisionmakers are cosponsors for REAL and Prevention First. If they are, write a quick note of thanks. If they are not, write a polite note explaining why they should be.
- Write letters and opinion pieces to your local newspaper, telling them why it’s important for teens to have objective, medically accurate information about sex and pregnancy/STI prevention.
- If you have teenagers, talk to them openly and honestly about sex and where to obtain contraception if/when they become sexually active. It is fine to emphasize that you hope they will wait to have sex until they are older, but in the case that they do not, they should have the wherewithal to protect themselves.

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Population Connection is America’s largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth’s resources.