

Abstinence Education Helps High-Risk Youth

by Janneke Pieters

WASHINGTON — President Obama allocated zero dollars toward abstinence-only education in his 2011 federal budget. He did the same in his last budget. But a landmark study published in the February issue of the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* (a journal of the American Medical Association) shows that abstinence-only education is significantly more effective than “safer sex” education in delaying sex among early adolescents who are at risk for HIV, sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. “Critics of abstinence-only education have said [the study] is a game-changer. We certainly hope it is a policy-changer,” said Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association.

The research, which followed 662 urban black sixth- and seventh-graders for two years, evaluated four sex education programs: abstinence-only, “safer” sex (condom use), comprehensive (both abstinence and condom use), and general health (control). The results were telling: At the end of the two-year program, 32.6% of teens in the abstinence-only program reported ever having sex, compared to 51.8% of students in the “safer” sex program. Teens in the abstinence program also had fewer sexual partners and were less likely to have unprotected sex. Other research confirms the findings. Huber cited 17 peer-reviewed studies of abstinence programs that showed results similar to the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* study. The Heritage Foundation found 16 studies of abstinence-based education programs that showed “statistically significant positive results in delaying early sexual activity and initiation,” according to its website.

Which Failed Experiment?

Many critics of abstinence-based education believe it is ineffective and contributes to risky sexual behavior. The Guttmacher Institute recently reported that for the first time in 10 years, the nation’s teen pregnancy rates rose 3% in 2006 along with teen birth rates (4%) and teen abortion rates (1%) — and quickly blamed the uptick on Bush-era abstinence-only programs. “Rigid abstinence-only-until-marriage programs” under Bush were a “failed experiment,” Heather Boonstra, senior public policy associate, said in a press release. The administration’s new teen pregnancy prevention initiative “ensures that programs will be age-appropriate, medically accurate and, most importantly, based on research demonstrating their effectiveness.”

The scientifically proven, age-appropriate and medically accurate *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* study calls claims like Boonstra’s into question. “The results may be surprising to some in that the theory-based abstinence-only curriculum appeared to be as effective as a combined curriculum and more effective than the ‘safer’ sex-only curriculum in delaying sexual activity,” the study concluded. In fact, a close look at the data reveals that children who took the abstinence-only course but still had sex were slightly more likely (75.8%) to use a condom than those who took the “safer” sex course (73.8%). “A theory-based abstinence-only intervention would not necessarily reduce adolescents’ condom use,” the study concluded. The real failed experiment is “safer” sex education programs, which received four times the federal funding of abstinence-only education programs even under the Bush administration, according to the National Abstinence Education Association’s website.

Speaking the Lingo

Study co-author Loretta Jemmott attributed her program’s success at least in part to efforts to “understand the children’s code, the ‘code of their street.’ We have to hear them, talk to them, find out what their attitudes are,” she told the Register. One difference between Jemmott’s program and other abstinence-only programs is that it did not emphasize waiting for sex until marriage, disparage condom use or use a “moralistic” tone. Instead, the program worked with teens to delay sex until they were “ready” to deal with its consequences. The program focused on teens’ short-term goals, and how HIV, sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy were obstacles to those goals.

“If you talk only about sex before marriage, the kids turn off the message. You don’t want to turn them off,” Jemmott said. Many of the children in the study, Jemmott pointed out, did not experience being raised by married parents, making it difficult for them to identify with the concept. But abstinence educator and author Mary Beth Bonacci feels differently. Children do connect to the idea of marriage, she told the Register. “‘Ready’ is a nebulous concept,” she said. “If this study had talked about sex within marriage in light of Church teaching, I think the results would have

been even better.” Bottom line: “Abstinence is the right message for this age group,” Jemmott said. “It’s a way for kids to think about themselves and to take care of themselves and their futures.”

Sex Ed at Home

Despite the relative success of the study, a third of the study’s population still was sexually active. “We are being overly simplistic saying a good sex education or abstinence education program is going to solve the problem,” Huber said. “Mom and Dad need to be front and center, learning how to communicate the benefits of abstinence.” Church teaching affirms that parents have first say in sex ed: “Sex education, which is a basic right and duty of parents, must also be carried out under their attentive guidance, whether at home or in educational centers chosen and controlled by them” (*Familiaris Consortio*).

Ninety-six percent of parents want teenagers to be taught that abstinence is best, according to a 2003 Zogby Poll. Seventy-nine percent said they want young people taught that sex should be reserved for marriage or in an adult relationship leading to marriage. Apparently, parents’ rights, interests and religious beliefs are barriers to the goals of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), which just released a report advocating sex education worldwide for children as young as 10 years old. The report blamed the “taboo on youth sexuality” for AIDS and teen pregnancy, and accused “fundamentalist” religions like Catholicism and Islam for imposing “tremendous barriers that prevent young people” from obtaining sexual information and services and for denying “the pleasurable and positive aspects of sex.” “The goal of IPPF is to sexually engineer society, and one way to accomplish this feat is to smear religious conservatives, especially Catholics,” said the Catholic League’s president, Bill Donohue, in a statement.

A Course Correction

Huber hopes that recent bipartisan calls for a “course correction” on sex-education funding on Capitol Hill will gain momentum. *The Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* study, the “most rigorous” of its kind to date, “gives Obama the perfect opportunity to amend his [budget] request, and/or Congress to amend his request to allow a stand-alone funding stream for abstinence education programs,” she said. “The federal government should get more money out there for [abstinence education] research,” Jemmott said. “Other age groups, cultures and communities should be studied ... to see what we can do to get these types of programs to work for other people.”

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