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## Study: Options Are Key in Sex Education Curriculum

Teaching both abstinence, risk-reduction may lower teen STD, pregnancy rates

By Rob Stein, Washington Post Staff Writer

Sex education programs that encourage teens to delay sexual activity but also teach them how to reduce their chances of getting pregnant or a sexually transmitted disease cut risky sexual behavior, increase condom use and lower the chances of getting the AIDS virus and other infections, an independent expert panel concluded in a report released Friday.

But there is insufficient evidence to know whether programs that focus on encouraging teens to remain sexually abstinent until marriage reduce the chances adolescents will engage in sexual behavior, be less likely to become pregnant or less likely to get a sexually transmitted disease, the panel concluded.

“There is sufficient evidence that comprehensive risk reduction efforts are effective,” said Randy Elder of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who works with the Task Force on Community Preventive Services, an independent 15-member panel that issues public health recommendations.

“As regards abstinence education, after a similar look the task force determined that based on a number of problems with the studies presented to them there was insufficient evidence” to determine their effectiveness,” Elder said.

The conclusions came after the task force reviewed an analysis of 83 studies of sexual education programs run between 1980 and 2007. The analysis was conducted by a 19-member team of experts assembled by the CDC to examine the politically sensitive question.

The findings come as Congress is considering whether to approve President Obama’s request to discontinue setting aside funds specifically for abstinence programs but instead allocate funding based on whether scientific research supports the approach.

The findings were immediately welcomed by advocates of programs that reduce teen pregnancy and critics of abstinence programs.

“At long last, evidence and common sense have returned to public health policy,” said James Wagoner of Advocates for Youth, a Washington-based group. “The task force report endorses the comprehensive approach to prevention that includes condoms and birth control. We should be spending taxpayer dollars only on evidence-based programs.”

“Most Americans would like their teens to stay away from sex,” said Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “Strong research shows that the best way to do this, especially in schools, is to use a curriculum that encourages teens to delay sex and also -- this is the key -- talks to them about family planning and protection. This is actually what most adults think is the right message -- delay and protect -- kind of like trust but verify.”

But the findings were condemned by advocates of abstinence programs. They argued that in fact the analysis showed that such programs are effective and comprehensive programs are not.

“If you compare the statistical significance of outcome measures related to sexual activity and sexual initiation the data is better for the abstinence education program than the comprehensive program,” said Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association.

Two members of the CDC team issued a dissenting report disputing the findings as well. They argued, among other things, that the analysis actually shows that comprehensive sexual education program in schools do not significantly increase teen condom use, reduce teen pregnancy or STDS.

“This is an important finding because the school classroom is where most teens receive sex education,” said Irene Erickson of the Institute for Research and Evaluation, who issued the dissenting report with Danielle Ruedt of the Georgia Governor’s Office of Children and Families. “Furthermore, the data indicated that many types of [comprehensive] programs do not work, even in non-school settings, yet the recommendations do not identify what those are. Unfortunately, the report’s conclusion that comprehensive sex education programs are broadly effective simply ignores these findings. This is misleading to policy-makers who are seeking evidence-based programs, especially for schools.”

But Elder disputed that argument, saying the critics’ arguments were flawed.

“All of those points were considered by the task force. They reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of a systematic review process. The whole point of what we are doing is to aggregate data from as many studies that are critical to answering the question. What they were doing was chopping up the evidence into very fine subsets to poke holes.”