

# Chicago Tribune

## Case renews abstinence-only debate

Experts: Now's a good time to have *The Talk*

By Deborah L. Shelton  
Dahleen Glanton

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With the pregnancy of Sarah Palin's 17-year-old daughter now becoming an issue in presidential politics, public health experts say that if parents haven't had a heart-to-heart recently with their children about sex, now would be an opportune time.

"We do hope that parents take this opportunity ... to sit down around the kitchen table and have a two-way discussion with the teens in their lives and address these issues of sex, love and relationship, pregnancy and family formation," said Bill Albert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Palin's daughter Bristol attended a school where abstinence education is taught, and Palin has expressed her opposition to "explicit" sex education.

Though abstinence education programs have become more prevalent in the past decade, fueled by more than \$1 billion poured into public

school programs by the Bush administration, their effectiveness in curbing teen sex and sexually transmitted diseases remains questionable.



A study sponsored by Congress found last year that students who took part in sexual abstinence programs were just as likely to have sex as those who did not, reported having similar numbers of sexual partners, and first had sex at about the same age.

Other research has shown that the decline in the percentage of teens having sex has stalled in recent years. "It's my personal belief that what may be driving that is the focus on sexual abstinence education," said Dr.

Lisa Henry-Reid, head of adolescent and young adult medicine at Chicago's Stroger Hospital.

"Teenagers are constantly exposed to sexual images, and to deprive them of the tools they need to make informed decisions [about birth control] is egregious."

Robert Rector, a senior fellow for the conservative Heritage Foundation, countered that promoting abstinence is like swimming upstream. "Abstinence programs are effective, particularly when you consider we are swimming in a culture that overwhelmingly promotes casual teen sex," he said.

The foundation found that of 15 programs that focused primarily on abstinence, 11 reported that the youths Case renews abstinence-only debate waited longer to have their first sexual

experience and had less sexual activity than youths who did not receive abstinence education, Rector said. He said they found the same results in five of the six studies where students signed virginity pledges.

But Henry-Reid said her teen patients tell worrying stories about their contraceptive practices, which include using Coca-Cola and Tylenol as birth control. About two-thirds of Illinois public schools offer sex education, including a discussion on condom use.

Albert said sexual abstinence and contraception are not mutually exclusive. "Too often abstinence and contraception are pitted against each other as contradictory policies when in fact they are complementary strategies. We want to encourage young people to delay. We also understand that at some point they are going to be sexually active and they will need information about contraception."