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page 162

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ONE NATION  
under confusion:  
Our teens need  
better sexual  
education.

**S**INCE 1996 THE AMERICAN government has poured more than \$1 billion into abstinence-only education programs in the belief that teaching kids not to have sex until marriage is the only sure way to prevent teen pregnancy, STDs, and HIV infection. But a growing number of studies is proving that these programs have little impact on adolescent sexual behavior. Worse, new research suggests they could even be endangering kids by failing to protect them from HIV.

Last year a study out of the University of Oxford reviewed 13 abstinence-only HIV prevention programs involving more than 15,000 U.S. youths and found that not one was successful at decreasing rates of HIV infection. Compared with control groups (which included students receiving no intervention at all or attending safe-sex courses), abstinence-only programs did not lower the incidence of unprotected sex, the frequency of STDs and pregnancy, or the number of partners

## Sex & Teens: Why Abstinence Isn't Working

Celibacy-based sex ed isn't preventing pregnancies or the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

students had; nor did it get them to use condoms more often or, ironically enough, pursue abstinence.

"They've given kids misinformation," says John Santelli, MD, chair of the department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, who has reviewed three major abstinence-only curricula and found medically inaccurate information in each of them. Two, for example, equated using condoms with a game of Russian roulette, implying that one fails every six times; another stated that they only delay, not prevent, some-

one from getting AIDS. But studies have shown that condoms fail less than 4 percent of the time and reduce the risk of contracting HIV by at least 80 percent.

What does seem to be working, according to research, is so-called comprehensive, or "abstinence plus," programs, which emphasize celibacy but also teach about STDs and contraception use. In the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned

Pregnancy's new report, *Emerging Answers 2007*, which examined 56 programs in the United States, two-thirds of the comprehensive classes had a positive effect on at least one risk behavior; abstinence-only made almost no difference.

Douglas Kirby, PhD, author of *Emerging Answers*, says: "Successful programs are those in which every single activity is designed to get the students to realize that they should not be having unprotected sex, that abstaining completely is purely the safest and best, but that if they do have sex, they should always use condoms and other contraception." —N.B.