

Abstinence-only study could alter sex-education landscape

The study found that abstinence-only sex education programs showed relative success in dissuading 12 year olds from having sex for two years afterward. It is the most comprehensive study to date to bolster an abstinence-only approach to reducing teen pregnancy.

By Amanda Paulson, Staff Writer

Abstinence-only education does work. Sometimes.

A new study published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine Monday showed that young teens given an abstinence-only message were significantly more likely to delay having sex than those receiving more comprehensive sex education.

The research is gaining attention since it's the first rigorously conducted study demonstrating that an abstinence-only program can be effective.

"This is really game-changing research, because it provides the first strong evidence that abstinence-only education can help very young teens delay sex," says Bill Albert, chief program officer for that National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonpartisan organization. "The menu of proven options just got larger, and that's good news."

The study used randomized trials with a group of 662 African-American 6th and 7th graders. Groups were assigned to one of the following:

- An 8-hour abstinence-only program.
- An 8-hour safer-sex-only program.
- An 8- or 12-hour program that combined both.
- An 8-hour control group that just focused on non-sex related health issues.

In the group receiving abstinence-only education, 33 percent began having sex over the next two years, compared with 47 percent of those in the control group. Among the other groups, 52 percent of those taught only about safe sex became sexually active within two years, as did 42 percent of those in the comprehensive program.

APPLES TO APPLES?

While abstinence-only advocates have welcomed the study as validation of methods they've been pushing for years, critics of such approaches caution that the program in this study is different in a number of respects, and warn against extrapolating the evidence too broadly.

For one thing, the targeted population – with an average age of 12 – was quite young. And for another, the abstinence program was carefully designed to try to avoid pitfalls others have encountered. It counseled children to delay sex "until they are ready" rather than until marriage, avoided a moralistic tone, and was careful not to disparage condom use, and to help children get rid of misconceptions about contraceptives if the subject came up during discussion.

"This is not the kind of program that the federal government has been funding," says Heather Boonstra, a senior public policy associate at the Guttmacher Institute, referring to the abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that thrived under the Bush administration.

Last week, the Guttmacher Institute released data showing that after a decade-long decline, America's teen-pregnancy rate rose 3 percent in 2006. Ms. Boonstra is among those who believe some of that uptick may be due to the reliance on abstinence-only programs.

But abstinence-only advocates dismiss such concerns, and welcome the new research.

"This is the most rigorous study to date," says Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, though she contends other studies have also shown positive results for such programs. "It just verifies what we've known intuitively all along, which is that abstinence-only education is a very important strategy to help young people delay having sex."

A CALL FOR MORE RESEARCH

The new study's lead author warns against either side reading too much into the research. "This is one study," says John Jemmott, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

He says he hopes this will spur other researchers to design similarly rigorous studies around abstinence-based programs that use the best practices from comprehensive sex-ed programs and to test it with different populations. "We would like to have a body of evidence."

The Obama administration has announced its intention to only fund evidence-based teen-pregnancy programs – sharply reducing federal funding for abstinence-only programs. But under those criteria, the type of abstinence-only program used in this new study would be likely to qualify.

One advantage to this, notes Mr. Albert of the nonpartisan National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, is that that could offer an effective option for communities who don't want a more comprehensive approach.

"No matter what the science says, there are going to be communities in this country that will only talk about abstinence before marriage," he says.