

The New York Times

Quick Response to Study Of Abstinence Education

By TAMAR LEWIN

A study of middle-school students that found for the first time that abstinence-only education helped to delay their sexual initiation is already beginning to shake up the longstanding debate over how best to prevent teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

"This is a rigorous study that means we can now say that it's possible for an abstinence-only intervention to be effective," Dr. John B. Jemmott III, the University of Pennsylvania professor who led the study, said Tuesday, hours after results of the study were released. "That's important, because for some populations, abstinence is the only acceptable message."

In Dr. Jemmott's research, only about a third of the students who participated in a weekend abstinence-only class started having sex within the next 24 months, compared with about half who were randomly assigned instead to general health information classes, or classes teaching only safer sex. Among those assigned to comprehensive sex-education classes, covering both abstinence and safer sex, about 42 percent began having sex.

Dr. Jemmott's research followed 662 African-American students at urban middle schools,

who were paid \$20 a session to attend the classes, plus follow-up and evaluation sessions. The abstinence-only classes covered HIV, abstinence and ways to resist the pressure to have sex.

"Because African-Americans tend to have a higher rate of early sexual initiation than others, we thought that within two years, a reasonable number would start having sex," Dr. Jemmott said. "If we went younger, we couldn't show that intervention works."

The research, published in the Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, appears just as the Obama administration is eliminating federal financing for abstinence-only programs, and starting a pregnancy-prevention initiative that will finance programs that have been shown in scientific studies to be effective.

Recognizing the political sensitivity of the research, and how unexpected are its results, the journal ran an accompanying editorial cautioning that public policy should not be based on the results of a single study and that policy makers should not "selectively use scientific literature to formulate a policy that meets preconceived ideologies."

"The results may be surprising to some in that the theory-based abstinence-only curriculum ap-

peared to be as effective as a combined course and more effective than the safer-sex only curriculum in delaying sexual activity," the editorial said. "None of the curricula had any effect on the prevalence of unprotected sexual intercourse or consistent condom use."

A shake-up in the debate over teenage pregnancy.

The executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, Valerie Huber, said she hoped that the new study would lead to restored federal support for abstinence programs.

"The current recommendation before Congress in the 2011 budget zeroes out abstinence education, and puts all the money into broader comprehensive education," Ms. Huber said. "I hope that either the White House amends their request or Congress acts upon this, reinstating abstinence education."

Ms. Huber also said she found it especially interesting that African-Americans were the focus of Dr. Jemmott's study since, she said, "our critics would contend

that the abstinence message would be least effective with the most at-risk youth."

Even longtime advocates of comprehensive sex education heralded the findings.

"This new study is game-changing," said Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, in a statement. "For the first time, there is strong evidence that an abstinence-only intervention can help very young teens delay sex and reduce their recent sexual activity as well. Importantly, the study also shows that this particular abstinence-only program did not reduce condom use among the young teens who did have sex."

Ms. Brown noted that the abstinence-only classes in the Jemmott study centered on people with an average age of 12 and that unlike the federally supported abstinence programs now in use, did not advocate abstinence until marriage.

The classes also did not portray sex negatively or suggest that condoms are ineffective, and contained only medically accurate information. Dr. Jemmott's abstinence-only course was designed for the research, and is not in current use in schools.