COMPREHENSIVE SEX ED THE MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO REDUCING STDs AND PREGNANCY

Study on Abstinence-Only Program Effectiveness Promising, But Insufficient

A study published in the *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* reporting on the effectiveness of an abstinence-only educational intervention shows promising but far from comprehensive results, says Elizabeth Schroeder, Ed.D., M.S.W., executive director for Answer, a national sexuality education organization based at Rutgers University.

The study, which reported on both an abstinence-only intervention and other more comprehensive approaches, showed that the abstinence-only program helped sixth and seventh graders delay high-risk sexual behaviors up to two years after the initial intervention.

“This study reinforces what we have been saying all along in the comprehensive sex ed field,” Dr. Schroeder says. “Sex education is not about teaching one topic to one age group and that’s it. It has to start at the earliest ages, build upon and reinforce the previous knowledge and skills learned, and evolve as students get older and become more likely to start having sex. No one seems to be talking about the fact that nearly a quarter of these sixth and seventh graders had already had sex by the time they became a part of this study. We have to start younger.”

Dr. Schroeder noted that a positive aspect of the study was that it emphasized teaching about abstinence using methods that are based in science and research, rather than by preaching a moralistic outcome. “It is a relief to finally see an intervention provide medically accurate information and be rooted in health behavior theories, rather than preach abstinence-only-until marriage,” Dr. Schroeder said.

Although much of the abstinence-only-until-marriage funding has been eliminated from the federal budget after spending more than $1 billion of federal and state funds, the renewed push for healthcare reform has provided an unforeseen opportunity to try to get the money put back into the federal budget. The Senate version of the healthcare reform proposal as it currently stands includes an amendment by Orrin Hatch (R-UT) that would re-introduce $50 million to fund abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, which research shows have no long-term positive effects on young people’s behaviors.

“This study reports some very significant data,” Dr. Schroeder says, “the most important of which is that an abstinence-only intervention, provided in a very specific way with a very specific population can work extremely well.” She cautioned, however, that the data did not demonstrate
that this should be the only approach, nor that this approach would work with all populations or age groups.

Dr. Schroeder also stressed that the study points to a related issue, the need for better training for professionals teaching sexuality education, both in schools and community-based organizations. “Most of the program facilitators had a master’s degree and all were trained in the subject area,” she said. “In many schools and community-based organizations, educators lack the background and support they want and need to be able to provide abstinence and other sexuality information as effectively as possible.”

“Answer applauds quality research that echoes our belief that sexuality education must start early and continue throughout a person’s life,” she said. “Young people need to have factual information, time to practice skills and ongoing support from important adults in their lives in order to stay healthy both now and in the future.”

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Answer is a national organization housed at Rutgers University that is dedicated to providing and promoting comprehensive sexuality education to young people and the adults who teach them. Its ongoing programs include the national Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project, which provides sexual health resources written by teens, for teens, through the Sex, Etc. national magazine and Web site, Sexetc.org; and the Sexuality Education Training Initiative, which provides training, resources and technical assistance to more than 5,000 educators and other professionals per year. To learn more about Answer, log on to http://answer.rutgers.edu.