

Sex education US-style: Don't Do It

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/06/01/1086058854941.html>

Sex education in US schools has taken on new meaning.

Teachers at institutions that accept government money must advocate abstinence until marriage as the only certain way to prevent unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

Teachers must also avoid any mention of contraception, except to point out the failure rates of various methods. But experts who have spent decades studying teenage sexual activity have gathered ample evidence to refute the basic premise of abstinence-only sex education. They say it is not adequate to protect youngsters from unwanted pregnancies and disease.

"There is nothing in any peer-reviewed scientific journal to suggest that teaching abstinence-only is effective in getting teens to delay sexual activity," said Cynthia Dailard, a lawyer at the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit organisation devoted to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In contrast, she said, evidence shows that sex education promoting abstinence, but also giving contraception information for those who do not remain abstinent, does delay the start of sexual activity and reduces teenage pregnancies and disease.

If teenagers are given no information about birth control, or only negative information, the studies indicate they are less likely to use any method of protection, and are more likely to become pregnant or get a sexual disease than are teenagers who are well informed about condoms and other contraceptive options.

One national study found that while some teenagers who promised abstinence until marriage delayed sexual activity by an average of 18 months, they were more likely to have unprotected sex when they revoked than those who never pledged virginity.

Another study found that most teenagers who pledged not to have sex before marriage did not live up to that vow. Abstinence-only advocates say that to teach abstinence with information on contraception is to provide a mixed message: Don't do it, but if you do, protect yourself.

In the past decade, there were approximately 800,000 to 900,000 adolescent pregnancies a year, and 3 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents. A quarter of sexually active teenagers will have a disease before they are old enough to vote.

About half of unplanned teenage pregnancies result from failures to use contraception.

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