



## Sex Education: What Does the Research Say?

Abstinence-only (“sexual risk avoidance”) advocates falsely claim that teaching students about condoms and other forms of contraception and disease prevention means advocating for sexual behavior by teens. In reality, it simply recognizes that most people will become sexually active at some point in their lives. In fact, 62 percent of Texas high school seniors say they are already sexually active even though most of the state’s school districts teach abstinence-only. Students deserve to learn the facts they need to make responsible life decisions that protect their health and their future. Moreover, research shows this approach is effective.

- A 2011 study by University of Georgia researchers found that states prescribing abstinence-only sex education programs in public schools have significantly higher teen pregnancy and birth rates than states with more comprehensive sex education programs.<sup>i</sup>
- Overwhelming evidence in studies over the last four decades debunks claims that teaching students about condoms and other forms of contraception leads to increased promiscuity among young people. In fact, studies show that comprehensive sex education – which includes instruction on abstinence – helps delay the decision by young people to begin having sex, decreases the number of partners for those who are sexually active, and increases the use of condoms and other forms of contraception and disease prevention.<sup>ii</sup>
- A 2012 review by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control of 66 comprehensive sex education and 23 abstinence-only programs found that the comprehensive programs were an effective strategy for reducing adolescent pregnancy and STI/HIV infection among adolescents but that “no conclusions could be drawn on the effectiveness of group-based abstinence-only education.”<sup>iii</sup>
- A 2017 review of research on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs found that such programs “have little demonstrated efficacy in helping adolescents to delay intercourse, while prompting health-endangering gender stereotypes and marginalizing sexual minority youth.”<sup>iv</sup>
- A review of research in 2008 indicated that most abstinence-only programs did not delay initiation of sex and only three of nine had any significant positive effects on any sexual behavior. In contrast, about two-thirds of comprehensive programs showed strong evidence that they positively affected young people’s sexual behavior, including both delaying initiation of sex and increasing condom and contraceptive use among important groups of youth who are sexually active.<sup>v</sup>
- Abstinence-only education has its own problems with failure rates. A 2016 study reported that many of the approximately 12 percent of girls and young women in the United States who pledge to remain abstinent until marriage fail to do so and are at a higher risk of HPV infection and nonmarital pregnancy. Researchers concluded that the results suggest pledgers use condoms and contraceptives less consistently and highlight unintended consequences of abstinence promotion.<sup>vi</sup>

[Sources on back]

- i Stanger-Hall KF, Hall DW (2011) Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S. PLoS ONE 6(10): e24658. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024658>
- ii “Promiscuity Propaganda: Access to Information and Services Does Not Lead to Increases in Sexual Activity,” Guttmacher Institute, June 2019, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2019/06/promiscuity-propaganda-access-information-and-services-does-not-lead-increases-sexual>
- iii Chin, H.B., Sipe, T.A., Elder, R. et al. “The effectiveness of group-based comprehensive risk-reduction and abstinence education interventions to prevent or reduce the risk of adolescent pregnancy, human immunodeficiency virus, and sexually transmitted Infections: Two systematic reviews for the Guide to community preventive services.” Am J Prev Med. 2012; 42: 272–294. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22341164>
- iv “Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, September 2017. [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(17\)30260-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(17)30260-4/fulltext)
- v Kirby, Douglas, “The impact of abstinence and comprehensive sex and STD/HIV education programs on adolescent sexual behavior,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, September 2008. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1525/srsp.2008.5.3.18>
- vi “Broken Promises: Abstinence Pledging and Sexual and Reproductive Health,” J Marriage Fam. 2016 Apr 1; 78(2): 546–561. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4806393/>