

FACT SHEET

ADOLESCENCE AND ABSTINENCE

Adolescents should be encouraged to delay sexual behaviors until they are physically, cognitively, and emotionally ready for mature sexual relationships and their consequences. Comprehensive sexuality education programs offer them a wide range of information while abstinence-only programs focus exclusively on abstinence until marriage. This Fact Sheet presents current statistics on adolescence and abstinence as well as research on both education approaches.

STATISTICS

- More than half of teenagers are virgins until they are at least 17 years of age.¹
- By the time they reach the age of 20, 20 percent of boys and 24 percent of girls have not had sexual intercourse.²
- The largest study of adult sexual behavior found that only 6.9 percent of men and 21 percent of women aged 18 to 59 had their first intercourse on their wedding night.³
- Many virgins are sexually involved. In one study of urban students in the ninth through the twelfth grades, 47 percent were virgins. More than a third of virgin male and female adolescents had engaged in some form of heterosexual genital sexual activity in the past year:
 - 29 percent of virgins had engaged in masturbation of a partner of the opposite gender.
 - 31 percent had been masturbated by a partner of the opposite gender.
 - 9 percent had engaged in fellatio with ejaculation with a partner of the opposite gender.
 - 10 percent had engaged in cunnilingus with a partner of the opposite gender.
 - 1 percent had engaged in anal intercourse with a partner of the opposite gender.⁴

COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

- Helping adolescents to postpone sexual intercourse until they are ready for mature relationships is a key goal of comprehensive sexuality education.⁵ Such education has always included information about abstinence.
- Interventions that are effective in encouraging teenagers to postpone sexual intercourse help them develop the interpersonal skills to resist premature sexual involvement. Effective programs include a strong abstinence message as well as information about contraception and

safer sex. For interventions to be most effective, teenagers need these programs before initiating intercourse.⁶

- In a 1993 study, SIECUS found that abstinence was among the topics most often covered in state curricula and guidelines along with families, decision making, and sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. The topics least likely covered included sexual identity and orientation, shared sexual behavior, sexual response, masturbation, and abortion.⁷
- Sexuality education does not encourage teens to start having sexual intercourse, increase the frequency of intercourse, or increase the number of sexual partners.⁸
- Teenagers who start having intercourse following a sexuality education program are more likely to use contraception than those who have not participated in a program.⁹

ABSTINENCE-ONLY EDUCATION

- To date, six studies of abstinence-only programs have been published. None found consistent and significant program effects on delaying the onset of intercourse. At least one provided strong evidence that the program did not delay the onset of intercourse. Thus, the weight of evidence indicates that these abstinence-only programs do not delay the onset of intercourse.¹⁰
- A study of 7,326 seventh and eighth graders in California who participated in an abstinence-only program found that the program did not have a measurable impact upon either sexual or contraceptive behaviors.¹¹
- Nearly two-thirds of teenagers think teaching “Just Say No” is an ineffective deterrent to teenage sexual activity.¹²
- The National Institutes of Health’s Consensus Panel on AIDS says that abstinence-only education “places policy in direct conflict with science and ignores overwhelming evidence that other programs (are) effective.”¹³

REFERENCES

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