

Government Web Site Advocating Abstinence Stirs Ire

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The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — How should you talk to your children about sex? A new government Web site gives parents advice on how to persuade their youngsters to avoid sex, that "abstinence is the healthiest choice." That's dictating values, say organizations ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to gay rights groups, and they want the site taken down.

But Michael Leavitt, secretary of the Health and Human Services Department, says the Web site is on target.

The site was designed for parents who are embarrassed about talking with their children about sex, Leavitt said in a statement.

"Parents have a tremendous amount of influence on their

children, and we want them to talk with their teens about abstinence so that they can stay safe and healthy," he said.

Promoting abstinence is fine, said Monica Rodriguez of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, but the government should also address the needs of teenagers who are already

ON THE WEB

- The Health and Human Services sex talk Web site is www.4parents.gov.
- The site for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States is www.siecus.org.

sexually active, gay or lesbian, or who have been sexually abused.

For example, she said Thursday, the site should promote the proper use of contraceptives, and it should not imply that homosexuality is wrong by encouraging parents of gay or lesbian children to consult a therapist.

"By and large, it's a Web site that believes in abstinence until marriage," said Rodriguez, whose advocacy group promotes comprehensive sexual education. "Everything on the Web site is designed to promote that value and help parents communicate that value to their children."

Her 41-year-old organization as well as the ACLU, the National Education Association and more than 100 other advocacy groups are asking HHS to take down the

Web site.

Bill Pierce, an HHS spokesman, said he was not surprised certain groups dislike the site.

"They've always opposed us on the issue of abstinence. That's fine," Pierce said. "One thing we do know about abstinence is that if you practice it, you will not have an unintended pregnancy or risk catching a sexually transmitted disease."

The site advises parents to tell their teens why they should not have sex: "Tell them abstinence is the healthiest choice. They will not have to worry about getting pregnant or getting someone pregnant. They will not have to worry about sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Nor will they have to worry that the person they are dating is only interested in them because of sex."

And it paints a bleak picture for teens who get pregnant: "Many teen mothers never finish high school. Teen mothers and their babies are more likely to have health problems. And families started by teen mothers are more likely to be poor and end up on welfare."

For parents of teenagers already having sex, there is a section on contraception.

But Rodriguez said that section promotes unsafe sex rather than safe sex.

The site describes condoms as imperfect, saying they can break or be used incorrectly, and it includes a chart of whether a condom protects a little, some or a lot against various sexually transmitted diseases.

"There's this misconception that giving young people negative information about contra-

ception will encourage them not to have sexual intercourse, when all it will do is encourage them not to have contraception, so the strategy backfires," Rodriguez said.

Patrick Fagan, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, said the Web site's information about condoms looked accurate.

"This is standard, straightforward research on the effectiveness of condoms," he said.

The groups protesting the Web site also contend it is biased against gays and lesbians.

The site says: "If you believe your adolescent may be gay, or is experiencing difficulties with gender identity or sexual orientation issues, consider seeing a family therapist who shares your values to clarify and work through these issues."