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Maggie Gallagher ([back to story](#))

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More virgins, more marriage

In 1990, 54 percent of American high schoolers had had sex. Ten years later, according to the latest findings of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 54 percent of high school students are virgins. What a difference 10 years makes!

That translates into roughly 1.5 million fewer young Americans at risk of pregnancy, unwed parenthood, sexually transmitted diseases, not to mention premature heartbreak and sexual ennui.

What changed? How do we account for the dramatic reversal of what many said was an unstoppable trend? Did TV, movies or pop music become less vulgar in the '90s? Certainly not.

"The only thing that changed in that time frame is the amount of talk and programming for abstinence until marriage," LeAnna Benn, director of the Teen-Aid abstinence program in Spokane, Wash., pointed out to The Washington Times. "The federal Title V abstinence program is having a tremendous impact," agreed Peter Brandt, of Focus on the Family.

Yet when the government first set aside funds for abstinence-only education in the mid-'90s, cynics jeered and critics sniffed. We have no proof such programs work, they said. (Some are still saying it.) Of course not. Only after government chooses to fund good demonstration projects and evaluation research will such proof emerge.

So now we know, for example, that "virginity pledges" work. Researchers reported in the American Journal of Sociology that taking the pledge reduces the probability a teen will initiate sex by one-third. Among students who took the virginity pledge AND whose parents disapproved strongly of premarital sex, the likelihood that teens would be sexually active dropped by three-quarters.

A study published in the Journal of Health Communications reported on the "Not Me, Not Now" program, which used radio and TV ads to promote abstinence among teen-agers in Monroe County, N.Y. The sexual activity rate of 15-year-olds dropped from 46.6 percent to 31.6 percent, according to the journal. Oh yes, and the pregnancy rate for girls aged 15 to 17 fell from 63.4 pregnancies per 1,000 girls to 49.5 pregnancies during the period the ads were aired. Other programs for teens that have a strong message about the importance of postponing sex report similarly powerful results.

For years, we had no proof most teen pregnancy prevention programs would work, either. And for years, they mostly did not, until evaluation research revealed the key component of successful programs: You gotta tell the kids it is a bad idea to have a baby while a teen-ager. What works, in general, is responsible adults talking straight with teens. Many will listen and learn.

Critics of President Bush now make similar dreary and reactionary claims about his marriage initiative:

There is no evidence that marriage education programs work. Actually, there is considerably more evidence that these programs work than that much of what government does is effective. Many marriage programs over the years have been shown to increase couple satisfaction, and the few that have been evaluated for divorce appear to reduce it.

But in particular there is every reason to think (from the success of teen pregnancy and abstinence education) that educating young people and young couples about the importance of marriage works. People bound and determined not to marry, of course, will not. People whose partners are violent or abusive should not marry -- or live together, either, for that matter.

But if educated adults, government officials, social workers, parents, family, friends and clergy raise marriage as an important issue for couples having babies, yes, they will think about it, and many more will make good marriages.

Why are more teen-agers today virgins? Government programs made a difference directly by educating teens on the value of postponing sex. But they made a difference indirectly as well, encouraging parents and other concerned adults to pass on this important message (once dubbed nostalgic and unrealistic) to teen-agers. And it worked!

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