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Speakers Tell Teens to Say 'Not Yet' to Sex

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By Adrienne Mand **FOX NEWS**

Lakita Garth has heard all the arguments for safer-sex education and teaching about contraceptives. But she spends her time preaching a simpler message: just don't do it.



AP/Wide World

File: A billboard in downtown Baltimore displays a message of abstinence toward teen sex.

"Most safe sex (instructors) are very well-intentioned people, but those are symptoms," said Garth, a traveling motivational speaker. "The problem isn't teens getting pregnant or teens getting STDs. That's not the problem. The problem is teens having sex."

Garth has delivered her message to more than a million teenagers in the United States, Caribbean and South America, but she is only a small part of a growing movement to tell kids it's best to save sex for marriage.

The National Abstinence Clearinghouse in Sioux Falls, S.D., recognizes about 1,400 nationally-known motivational speakers, up from 150 when the group was formed three years ago. Their ranks have grown since 1996, when \$50 million in congressional abstinence-training funds aided the cottage industry and introduced abstinence curricula in many schools.

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NAC president Leslee Unruh said there would be more abstinence speakers, regardless of the money. "It's vogue, it's in style, it's sexy — finally," she said.

The teen birth rate is on the decline, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released in August. The birth rate for teenagers dropped 3 percent between 1998 and 1999 to a rate of 49.6 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19 — the lowest rate

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Both sides have claimed credit for the progress, with abstinence advocates saying their message has gotten through, while sex education experts contend this is evidence that their programs work.

According to a study released last month by reproductive health organization The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 23 percent of secondary school sexuality education teachers taught abstinence as the only way of preventing pregnancy and STDs in 1999, compared with 2 percent who did so in 1988. However, 39 percent of 1999 respondents who presented abstinence as the only option also told students that both birth control and condoms can be effective.

The increasing focus on abstinence has renewed the debate over what message to send to children in a world inundated with sexual imagery and frankness. Many sex educators now embrace the notion of telling kids to wait until they're married, while providing them with information on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases.

"Certainly, an abstinence message is an important message for young people to hear," said Tamara Kreinin, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. "What we think is critical is to give young people the message of abstinence coupled with accurate information about biology, sexuality and access to contraception."

That rankles some abstinence advocates, who say the sex talks do not provide a full picture of the risks involved.

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John Diggs, a doctor who serves on the medical board of the National Abstinence Clearinghouse, noted that recent research cited by the American Cancer Society found condoms do not prevent transmission of the human papilloma virus, which can cause cervical cancer. Plus, he said, teens tend not to use condoms correctly.

"The only products teens use consistently well are hair products," he said. "The only thing that you can do is teach character development. It doesn't always work, but it works a lot better than the safe sex message."

Still, there are those who say expecting all kids to abstain and not advocating condoms since they're not 100 percent effective is like telling them not to use a parachute while skydiving because it may not work.

"I think that theirs is the mixed message because they're telling (the teens) nothing else," said Dr. Lee Lee Doyle, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences' College of Medicine. "There are some good parts of some of the abstinence curricula, but there are also some parts that are not really factually-based, scare techniques."

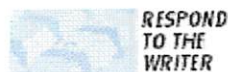
Garth countered that the abstinence teachers she's met all address contraception, though they focus mostly on emotional issues, unlike some schools.

"They're giving them what they want and not what they need," she said. "They all want candy. What they need is healthy relationships. There's so much instruction on the sex that we neglect anything else."

A new study by the health care policy research group Kaiser Family Foundation suggests that parents agree. The survey found that 94 percent of parents want schools to address the pressure to have sex and the emotional consequences of becoming sexually active.

From her talks at schools in areas ranging from depressed urban neighborhoods to well-heeled suburbs, Garth said she has found one common theme: Kids are having sex to fill a void of intimacy.

"People turn this into a political issue, a moral issue and every other thing," she said. "Everyone has forgotten about the kids and what they really want at the heart of it all, and that's the saddest thing."



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