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Teen-age sex education works

Programs do not encourage experimentation: report

By Laura Meckler
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May 30 — Sex education and other programs that tell teen-agers how to avoid pregnancy and AIDS do not encourage them to experiment and in some cases discourage it, a review of some 250 studies found.

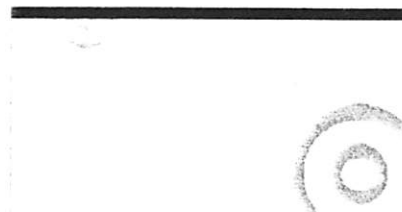
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THE REVIEW, sponsored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, identified a



Do you think teen-age sex education programs encourage sexual activity?

- Yes.
- No. They do not encourage it.
- No. In fact, they discourage it.

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handful of programs that have succeeded in reducing teen pregnancy, including a handful that talk straight to teens about sex and a couple that focus on community service, giving teens constructive alternatives.

There remains no evidence about whether “abstinence-only” programs, a favorite of conservatives, are effective, the review said, even as the Bush administration proposes an increase in federal funding for them. A national evaluation of a \$250 million abstinence program created by the 1996 welfare law is now under way, but results are not available.

Backers of these programs believe that talking about the benefits of birth control while encouraging abstinence sends a mixed message, but the report released Wednesday disagrees.

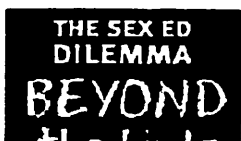
Teens and sex

- Thirty-nine percent of ninth-graders and 65 percent of twelfth-graders have engaged in intercourse.
- Just over 8 percent of high-school students in 1999 said they'd had sex by age 13.
- One in four sexually active teen-agers will contract at least one STD.
- Four in 10 girls become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 – nearly 1 million a year.
- Just 25 percent of sexually experienced 15-to-17-year-olds had ever been tested for HIV in 1998; 29 percent for other STDs.
- Fifty-eight percent of sexually active high-schoolers reported using a condom the last time they had sex.
- Three out of five Americans living with HIV were infected as teens.
- Gonorrhea rose 13 percent among teens between 1997 and 1999, with teen-age girls having the highest rates of any females.
- An estimated 3 million people contract chlamydia each year in United States; 40 percent of cases occur in 15-to-19-year-olds.

Sources: CDC; Kaiser Family Foundation; National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

“The overwhelming weight of evidence shows that sex education that discusses contraception does not increase sexual activity,” concludes the report, “Emerging Answers,” written by researcher Douglas Kirby, a senior researcher at ETR Associates in Scotts Valley, Calif.

Four years ago, Kirby conducted a similar review of studies about teen pregnancy prevention and concluded that



almost none of the programs that had been evaluated made a difference. This time, he reports, the findings are more optimistic.

Teen pregnancy, abortion and birth rates have been falling since 1991, and birth rates are now at their lowest level recorded, with about 50 out of every 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19 giving birth in 1999, a 20 percent drop since 1991.

Tips for sexually active teens

- Sexually active teen-agers should be tested annually for HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhea (more often if they're changing sexual partners frequently or having sex without condoms.)
- Girls engaging in sexual activity should get annual Pap smears to ensure that they're not experiencing cervical cell changes from HPV, which, if left untreated, could eventually lead to cervical cancer.
- Adolescents should use a condom for all sexual encounters, but recognize that even then, sex is not risk-free. For example, HPV and herpes can be spread despite condom use if the carrier is shedding virus from parts of the genital region not covered by the condom.

Sources: Dr. Penelope Hitchcock and Kathleen Ethier

what's sometimes called "abstinence-plus." They delivered a "clear message" that abstaining from sex is the safest choice for teens, but those who are sexually active should protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

OTHER FINDINGS

The report, which examined only programs that had been scientifically evaluated, also concluded:

- Family planning clinics probably prevent many teen pregnancies, although there is little evidence to prove it. Some studies have found that clinics were able to increase use of birth control by providing top-quality educational materials, discussing the patient's sexual

Experts point out that teen sexual activity has dropped as use of condoms increased - both largely due to fear of AIDS. Still, communities often struggle when trying to create programs to reduce their rates.

Kirby's report found eight programs that showed evidence of success: five sex education programs; two community service programs that included group discussions; and one intensive program that combined sex education, health care and activities such as tutoring.

All the effective sex education programs employed

and contraceptive behavior and sending a clear message about what works.

Healthy discussion

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- Programs that give away condoms at school have produced mixed results in reducing sex and

pregnancy, although studies have consistently shown that these programs do not increase sexual activity.

- Generally, short-term programs of any stripe were not effective.

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