

Abstinence-Only for Teenagers: A Pipe Dream

The Wall Street Journal

Politics & People

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May 2, 2002

Our only daughter became a teenager yesterday causing me to search for a sanctuary for the next seven years and to pay more attention to matters like a House committee approving a sexual abstinence-only measure.

The first is unrealistic; so is the second.

Abstinence-only programs have become sacrosanct theology for the political right and President Bush, pandering to this important constituency, is supportive. It's a delusion.

There are two overarching points: Teenage pregnancy and promiscuity in America is a serious problem—the U.S. has the highest teenage birth rate in the world—and any caring parent or counselor should extol the desirability of sexual abstinence to their teenagers.

But the Bush abstinence-only plan is fundamentally flawed. Most experts say while some initiatives like virginity pledges offer some modest hope, research clearly demonstrates there are far more effective programs. Douglas Kirby, a California scholar who has done extensive research for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, says while there is no "good evidence" that abstinence-only measures "have any positive outcomes," it is clear that comprehensive anti-pregnancy efforts that emphasize abstinence and contraception or safe sex do. What message works? "Abstinence is the only 100% effective method and avoid unsafe sex—always use condoms or contraceptives if you have sex." These admonitions, he says, "are not incompatible."

The best program may be the Children's Aid Society's after-school and weekend program, started by Dr. Michael Carrera in New York and now nationwide. It not only deals with sexuality—abstinence and safe sex—but also youth development, esteem and opportunities. The Carrera Program gets some kids to delay sexual activity for several years and then to practice safer sex. It costs about \$4,000 a kid, a good investment.

Dr. Carrera, who has been running this holistic effort for 18 years, says the abstinence-only programs don't work because "they lie to kids," telling them that any sexual contact will devastate their lives and that contraception doesn't work. "You can't fool these kids," he notes, assailing the hypocrisy of most politicians who try to. Under the House committee measure, anyone taking federal funding can only talk about the dangers of condoms and contraception.

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Contentions that condoms have little effect on HIV transmission and none on other sexually transmitted disease are simply wrong. Experts say proper condom use is highly effective against HIV and useful against some other STDs, like gonorrhea, though less useful against others, like herpes. Moreover, when kids do have sex—and most will—they will more easily reject the usage of condoms.

But the social-right crowd has no interest in facts. In passing the abstinence-only legislation, the House Commerce Committee defeated amendments that would have forbade any federally funded efforts from disseminating information not medically or scientifically verifiable; required research showing these programs actually work; and allowed states more leeway in using some of these funds to work with sexually active teenagers. Self-styled conservatives were declaring local government doesn't know best, that a federal program doesn't have to demonstrate its value or cost-effectiveness and truth or reliability is irrelevant.

Yet any deviation from abstinence-only, proponents insist, would send a “mixed message” to teenagers. I wish parenting were that easy. Within a framework of moral clarity, we constantly convey nuanced messages to our kids. We tell our teenagers not to drink alcohol and certainly never to drink and drive. But if they do drink, please call us to take them home.

Indeed, as Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution, president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy notes, the best approach invariably is that which has credibility with teens; truth is basic. “You can send a message that abstinence is the best choice for a variety of reasons—it's the only 100% effective way to prevent pregnancy and disease,” she says. “But we also need to educate teens about birth control and should not be squeamish about the difference between educating and promoting.”

The social right too often tries to demagogue this distinction. An example: Research clearly demonstrates that an impediment to persuading young men to use condoms is the belief that they detract from sexual pleasure. Yet critics falsely charge that campaigns trying to demonstrate that isn't necessarily the case is tantamount to glorifying sex.

It's important to realize that any adolescent sexuality initiative doesn't operate in a vacuum; kids get lots of other information about sex, some from positive sources, some from not-so-good places. That's the context of talking about the dangers of teen pregnancy or the transmission of STDs, and a simple black and white message won't cut it with most kids. It may be politically perilous in some districts to oppose abstinence-only legislation. But substantively it's a myth. That's the conclusion of research, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatricians, the Nurses' Association and, I would strongly suspect, the vast majority of teenagers.

Recent comments of two prominent Republicans are illustrative. Secretary of State Colin Powell urged all sexually active youngsters to use condoms, that their lives mattered more than any taboos or “conservative ideas.” House GOP Whip Tom DeLay, by contrast, advised his Texas constituents not to send their kids to Texas A&M (one of the more conservative institutions in the state) because they have sex there.

“Not all teenagers listen to our wisdom,” notes Dr. Carrera. “You have to talk to young people where they are, not where we would like them to be.” Most teenagers—ranging from impoverished at-risk kids to those of privilege—would at least listen to Colin Powell's message. But try preaching Tom DeLay's moralism to your teenager.