

Going Past 'Just Say No'

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Talk about throwing good money after bad. Five years ago, Congress appropriated \$250 million to teach teenagers about sex. But the money could be spent only to teach them to say no. A study released last week found that this federal gag rule on realistic sex education may be doing nothing to cut teenage pregnancies.

That means young women's lives needlessly stunted by motherhood or the trauma of abortion or even HIV, young men not learning to be equally responsible for preventing pregnancy—and disease. And more children raised by single parents.

Nonetheless, a House committee voted last week to renew the program for another five years. Amendments that would have allowed states to decide whether to include information about birth control methods as well were rejected. As the kids say, how dumb is this?

Many parents would prefer not to think of their teenagers as sexually active. But wishing that they stay chaste won't make them so.

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This argument has carried Congress since 1996, when, as part of the original welfare reform bill, the legislators appropriated money for school-based sex education. To receive funds, states had to agree to teach that abstinence "outside of marriage [is] the expected standard" and that sexual activity outside of marriage may have harmful side effects. So, for example, health teachers can warn teens that condoms may break but not that condoms can help prevent pregnancy.

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Apart from being disingenuous, there's no reliable evidence that this straitjacket is helping to reduce teen sex or even is responsible for a mild drop in teen pregnancies over the last decade. That was the conclusion of the new study, a preliminary independent evaluation of the federal sex education program contracted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. California has long refused this federal money, preferring to teach teenagers about abstinence and birth control.

The full House will take up the abstinence-only renewal in coming months. Maybe this time House members will recall their own heated adolescent urges and support a more realistic set of guidelines for sex education.

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