

Don't Just Say No

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Conservatives in Congress are undoubtedly right when they say that abstinence is the best way for teenagers to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. If you don't engage in sexual activity, you can't very well get into trouble on either count. But they are recklessly wrong when they insist that sex education programs in the schools should teach abstinence only. The Senate Finance Committee needs to modify the government's blinkered approach when it meets today to mark up the latest welfare reform bill.

For the last five years, the federal program has provided \$50 million a year in matching funds to states to promote abstinence from sex outside of marriage. The catch is that states accepting the money may not "endorse or promote" contraceptives, but may only talk about their drawbacks.

This is a recipe for disaster in a nation that has the highest teenage pregnancy rate of any developed country. It is fine to urge teenagers to "just say no" to sex before marriage, but surely it makes sense to provide them as well with information that could avert pregnancies or protect them from a fatal AIDS infection should they become sexually active. Senator Max Baucus, the Montana Democrat who heads the Finance Committee, is expected to propose an amendment today that would give states some flexibility to teach the health benefits of contraception. That modest change should be approved by all who are interested in protecting the health of teenagers.