

Extra Feature Story

New Study Supports Abstinence-focused Sexual Education

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A new study shows that abstinence-focused sexual education programs encourage a significant number of people to delay sexual activity, perhaps preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. The findings could influence President Obama's decision about how to spend money allotted for pregnancy-prevention programs.

Published in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, the study followed 12- and 13-year-old students. A third of those in abstinence-focused classes began having sex during a two year period, compared to almost half of the students in other classes.

The students in abstinence-focused classes were not less likely to use condoms or other forms of birth control, the study found.

The report comes as Congress begins to consider President Obama's proposed budget, which set aside funding for pregnancy prevention programs scientifically proven to prevent conception — programs that do not include any abstinence-focused initiatives.

Obama administration officials said a program like the one implemented in the study could be eligible for federal funding. That would change the nature of an ongoing political debate about the value of abstinence-focused education.

The Jemmott Study

The study, led by Dr. John Jemmott of the University of Pennsylvania, evaluated 662 African-American students in the sixth and seventh grades, all of them from four low-income schools.

These students were divided randomly into four groups. The first group had eight hours of sexual education that focused on delaying sex, the second group had an eight-hour program focused on safe sex practices and a third group had an eight- or 12-hour curriculum that incorporated both sets of information. The fourth group of students, a control group, studied healthy lifestyle choices like exercise and nutrition, but received no sexual education.

The classes that focused on abstinence sought to delay sex until students were ready, not until they married. Though teachers did not readily offer information about condom usage or other contraception, they provided accurate information to students who asked about birth control.

At the end of the two-year study, 48.5 percent of those in the control group began having sex, compared to 33.5 percent in the classes emphasizing abstinence. Of the students in the class teaching safe sex, 52 percent became sexually active, as opposed to 42 percent of students in the comprehensive program.

"I think we've written off abstinence-only education without looking closely at the nature of the evidence," said Jemmott. "Our study shows this could be one approach that could be used."

New administration, new policies

The Jemmott study arrived days after the non-partisan Guttmacher Institute reported that the pregnancy rate among 15 to 19-year-old girls had increased 3 percent from 2005 to 2006 -- the first increase in more than a decade.

Proponents of comprehensive sexual education noted a correlation between increased rates of teenage pregnancy and President George W. Bush's support of abstinence-only programs. They argued that eight years of federally funded, abstinence-focused education had not worked.

The Obama administration has eliminated \$170 million in abstinence-only education, and his proposed budget includes \$114 million for pregnancy-prevention initiatives with comprehensive approaches to sexual education. These programs provide scientific information on sex and contraception while encouraging teenagers to delay having sex.

But officials told the Washington Post that the new study opens the door for more abstinence-focused programs.

Heated political debate

Supporters of abstinence-only education cheered the research. "The president was misguided in his move to zero out this approach," said Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association. "We are confident that Congress will reassess that decision."

But Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said there was a difference between the approach in the Jemmott study and some of the more moral-focused programs supported by the Bush administration. "It was not negative about contraception, it was not negative about sex," she explained.

She also pointed out that the students who were in the abstinence-only program who ended up having sex would be less informed about protection and therefore perhaps more susceptible to disease or unintended pregnancy.

Huber points to studies indicating that people who wait longer to have sex tend to have fewer partners and be less at risk for infection or unwanted pregnancies than those who don't.

The Jemmott study did not record whether participants contracted disease or became pregnant.

-- Compiled by Anne Strother for NewsHour Extra

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