

## **Abstinence Education Reveals Positive Findings**

Surveys of both parents and teens reveal that the overwhelming majority – over 90% - believe that it's best for teens to delay sex until after high school. A fair number of people also see the benefits in waiting until marriage for all the same reasons. While, abstinence education, as a prevention movement, is still in its infancy stage, there is a great deal of good news about its benefits for teens. It's important to have a certain amount of perspective as many education and prevention programs are gleeful about small gains, but the expectations are quite high in the abstinence movement.

Since the mid-1990s, Congress has authorized \$50 million annually for the states to provide abstinence education as they best see fit. This correlated to a time of extremely high teen pregnancy rates which have since dropped to a 60-year low. The majority of that drop has been attributed to increased abstinent behavior. A small part of that funding was directed toward evaluation of four interventions reaching elementary and middle school students, primarily among high-risk youth. The initial “wave” of analysis, though preliminary, reveals positive findings. The students increased in knowledge of physical development, risk awareness, and interpersonal skills. They also were more supportive of abstinence and less supportive of teen sex than the students who didn't participate in the abstinence education. These students were also more aware of the negative consequences of teen and non-marital sex. Future evaluation will look at the impact of the programs on behavior among this group.

The *Best Friends* mentor program is based in Washington, D.C., home to the nation's highest teen pregnancy rates. The program stresses the development of self-control and the avoidance of drinking and drug use as well as sex among middle school girls. The study compared program participant responses over time to those of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. At every level, the *Best Friends* girls were far less likely to have ever smoked, used drugs or alcohol, or had sex. The difference increased the older the girls were.

The value of students making a public commitment to abstinence commonly called, Abstinence Pledges, was first confirmed and then came into question as to its staying power. A new review of data of almost 15,000 students cleared the matter up (it was presented to the 2005 Research and Evaluation Conference conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services). Pledgers were less likely to engage in vaginal intercourse and other sexual behaviors than those who didn't take an abstinence pledge. It was also found that pledgers were 25% less likely to have an STD. In fact, pledgers were a better predictor of lower STD rates than condom users.

Pre-marital abstinence seems to have other positive outcomes. The usual benefits of abstinence focus on avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. A recent study published in the journal of *Adolescent & Family Health* (April 2005) found that people who remained virgins until age 18 attained more education and were half as likely to experience divorce. Female virgins were more likely to have a positive financial net

worth and were less likely to use welfare benefits or to experience health problems. All in all there's a lot of good news about the positive benefits for teens choosing abstinence.