

Peers Teaching Abstinence

by Eve Jackson, PEERS Project Director

Teenagers Eric Byers and Marsha Hawes are in love, and they are proving it by *not* getting sexually involved.

They are also helping their peers make healthy choices regarding sexual behavior. They serve as peer educators for a preventive health model—The PEERS Project—initiated in 1994 by St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services in Indianapolis, Indiana. PEERS mentors help younger teens avoid the painful consequences of premature sex: single parenthood, STDs, the end of their education, poverty, a broken heart, and guilt.

To empower positive role models like Eric and Marsha, St. Vincent provided a grant to design a peer-facilitated abstinence education intervention. Research finds that promoting youth development through active engagement enables adolescents to internalize positive values, make good choices, and build healthy relationships.

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Adults wrote the PEERS curriculum, but students teach it. They make it a credible lifestyle, showing that cool and popular people have made the choice to remain abstinent.

The Grade-By-Grade Curriculum

In the PEERS program, each grade learns a different concept related to sexuality. *Sixth-graders* are taught about the meaning of friendship and how to guard themselves against the messages expressed in song lyrics and television shows. *Seventh-graders* learn about the dangers of STDs and the emotional repercussions of premarital sex. *Eighth-graders* focus on the difference between love and infatuation, the responsibilities of parenthood, and why a father is so important in a child's life. *Freshmen* and *sophomores* learn *what love really is*, as well as how to recommit to chastity if they've made mistakes in the past.

Says 18-year-old Savannah Smith, "A lot of girls think they won't have a good chance with guys if they don't have sex. So it really helped to hear it [the abstinence message] from the high school students. They were close

to our own age and were encouraging role models."

There are two versions of the program: *Peers Educating Peers* (secular) and *A Promise to Keep* (faith-based). PEERS mentors must be recommended by teachers, youth ministers, or youth leaders. They use scripted interactive lessons and share their personal testimonies about why they have chosen to abstain from premarital sex. Video vignettes supplement the lessons.



PEERS Spreads to Six States

School districts in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, New York, and Washington have implemented PEERS. In Indiana, more than 6,000 high school-age mentors have presented PEERS lessons to 50,000 adolescents. The project has reached inner-city youth through youth organizations that provide after-school and summer programs. Spanish-speaking teens deliver the community-based sessions to Latino adolescents.

Youth Trends in Sexual Behavior

Is it realistic to expect young people to abstain from sexual activity until marriage? The October 7, 2002, issue of *Time* reported a resurgence in virginity among youth, and a consequent increase in medical and educational professionals' respect for abstinence education. The December 9, 2002, issue of *Newsweek* featured a cover story, "The New Virginity," with interviews of teens who had decided to save sex for marriage. The CDC's 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System reported that among high school students, virgins are now in the majority for the first time in 25 years.

One possible reason for this shift in adolescent sexual behavior is the growth of abstinence programs that teach the age-old concept of saving sex for marriage.

Mathematica Policy Research has contracted with the Department of Health and Human Services to evaluate federally funded abstinence programs and will release reports next year and in 2005. The PEERS Project received a three-year grant which will include an evaluation of its school- and community-based programs. ■

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