

Benefits of Delaying Sexual Debut

Executive Summary

Today's adolescents have an array of challenges before them that previous generations never faced. Fifty years ago, there were only a handful of STIs; today, sexually active teens are at risk for acquiring over two dozen. At the same time, the age at first marriage has steadily risen by 20-25 percent, cohabitations have increased 6.5 times, and sex before wedlock has become the norm, not the exception. If that's not enough, combine the 24 hour media circus with a billion dollar internet pornography industry, Victoria's Secret at every shopping mall, and Hollywood's sex-saturated messages broadcast in your living room, and you have a sex-on-demand culture being digested by our children every day.

As this review of literature shows, the range of benefits that postponing sex offers young people is scientifically proven, but in order for adolescents to embrace this message, these concepts need to be communicated effectively and often within public education. Surveys indicate that parents desire an abstinence message for their children; however, U.S. culture is simply not reinforcing this value, making it difficult for youth to understand the reasons why they should wait for sex. Thus, educational strategies should focus on the following conclusions that can be drawn from the benefits of delaying sexual debut.

Premarital sex has a negative impact on the physical health of adolescents, and typically hurts girls more than boys. Although sexually active young men are at risk to acquire STIs, females (especially younger girls) are more vulnerable to these infections because of their biological makeup. Girls are also more likely to suffer physical abuse in sexual relationships, and research indicates that adolescent females have a higher probability of contracting an STI when their romantic partner is substantially older. Typically, girls do not report using condoms as consistently as boys; and neither gender's brain is developed enough to make reasoned, future-oriented decisions about contraception. Girls also tend to pay a much higher price than boys when it comes to teenage pregnancy, as they are often left to carry and raise the child on their own.

Some of these physical consequences may also play a role in the psychological health outcomes of sexually active youth. For example, adolescent girls who are abandoned

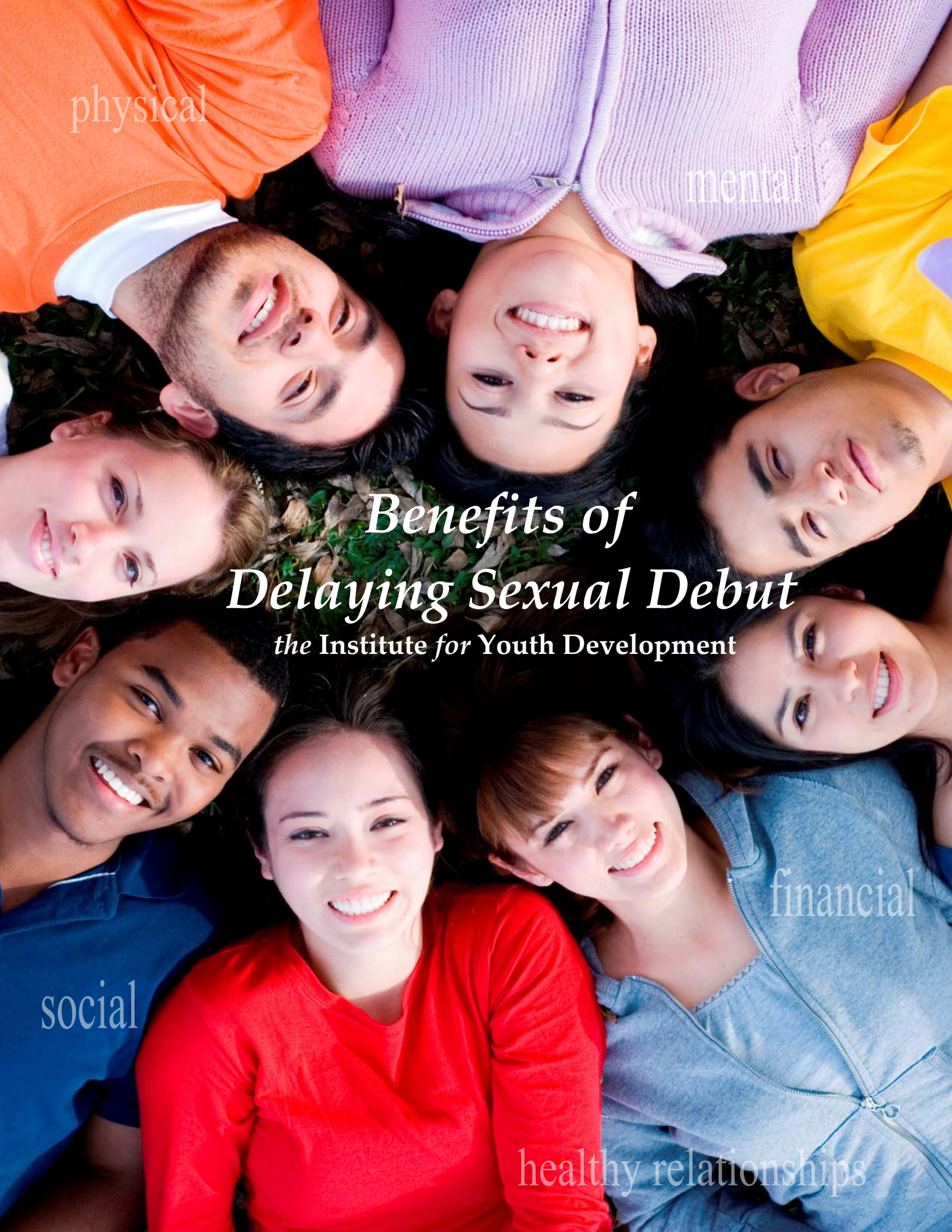
by their boyfriend after learning of a pregnancy may become depressed with the prospect of raising a child alone. Women also tend to make more of an emotional investment in romantic relationships, which could lead them down the path of seeking love through sex; this in turn may result in the vicious cycle of repetition/compulsion. On the other hand, boys typically suffer psychological symptoms only when combining sexual activity with other high risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use; and both genders are more likely to think about and commit suicide if they have initiated sex, especially those at a young age. However, if young people wait to have sex until marriage, they avoid these risks, and stand to benefit from the social and financial advantages that abstinence offers.

One of the best social outcomes that results from abstinence is the occurrence of healthy relationships. When adolescents choose to wait, they avoid premarital sexual bonds with other partners. This in turn makes them far less likely to get involved in cohabitations, which is a major risk factor for future marital infidelity and divorce. Healthy marriages also benefit the well-being of each spouse (especially men), and provide a nurturing environment for children.

Another social benefit that stems from abstinence is increased financial stability. When adolescents avoid childbearing outside of marriage, they are able to focus their attention on educational pursuits and future careers, without having to sacrifice the time and money that a family demands. Although research has not demonstrated a clear causal relationship between early sex and delinquency, many studies show that when teenagers abstain, they are less likely to get enmeshed in a problem behavior syndrome that includes poor academic performance, substance use, and other risk behaviors. It may very well be that abstinence acts as a protective barrier, insulating teenagers from an array of harmful behaviors that have the potential to create future problems.

Although the data is not clear for every single outcome, research does demonstrate that delaying sexual debut has a significant impact on the physical, psychological, financial, and social health of young people. Parents and policy makers alike should continue to embrace abstinence as a primary message for sexual education, develop strategies based upon the existing data, while building upon new research that continues to evolve in adolescent sexual health.





physical

mental

*Benefits of
Delaying Sexual Debut*
the Institute for Youth Development

social

financial

healthy relationships

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Introduction

This work explores a large body of peer-reviewed literature and addresses the benefits of delaying sexual debut in the context of physical, mental, and social health. It also considers the economic and financial advantages gained by avoiding early sexual debut, as well as the impact abstinence has on future fidelity, marital stability, and healthy relationships. It will examine the level of academic achievement youth are likely to reach when they make healthy choices, as well as showing the interconnectedness that abstinence has on overall life achievement and wellness.

Recent data in the United States (U.S.) indicates encouraging trends for young people choosing to abstain from sex. The percent of youth who have ever engaged in sexual intercourse declined from 54.2 percent in 1990¹ to 46.8 percent in 2005,² with teen birth rates also decreasing by 35 percent in the same period.³ However, a significant proportion of adolescents still engage in sexual intercourse, and studies reveal that those who initiate sex at an early age often experience worse health, lower educational attainment, and less economic productivity later in life than their abstaining peers.⁴ Although teenagers represent only one quarter of the sexually active U.S. population, they account for nearly half of all new cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).⁵ Additionally, the U.S. has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates among developed countries.⁶

Why Abstain? The Consequences of Early Sexual Debut

Studies show that when adolescents experience sexual debut at an early age, the

great majority wish they had waited until they were older. Those who have early sex are more likely to suffer partner violence, STDs, psychological harm, and depression; more likely to experience early pregnancy and low academic achievement; and much more likely to face unstable marriage and divorce. These alarming facts have spurred public health experts and lawmakers to advocate delaying sexual debut as a means of primary risk prevention – a message that emerges primarily in the form of abstinence education.

Background: Abstinence Education in the United States

Abstinence education (or abstinence-until-marriage) teaches the advantages of postponing sexual activity until one is able to absorb the responsibilities that result, and encourages youth to avoid all sexual activity outside of marriage. Federal funding for abstinence education has increased, largely because of the growing number of medical professionals, public health officials, sociologists, psychologists, sexual educators, teachers, parents, and adolescents who recognize that delaying sexual debut until one is older or married provides the best physical, mental, financial, and social health outcomes.

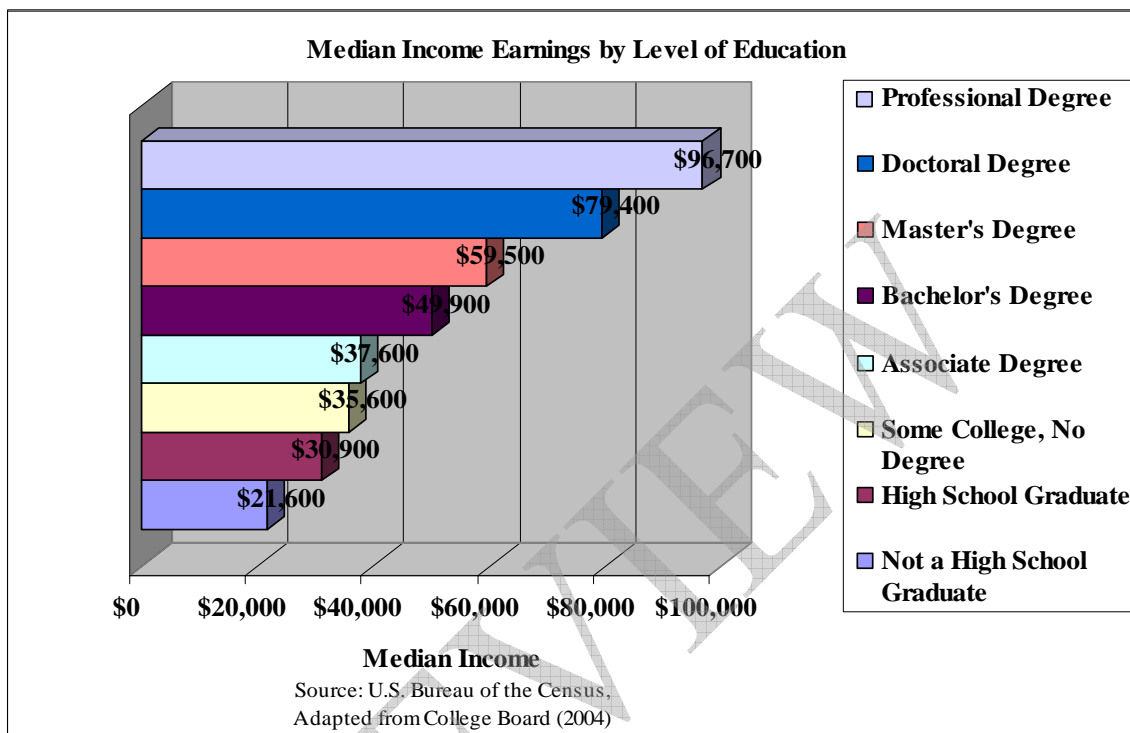
Currently, the federal government promotes abstinence education as the expected standard for all school age children through three grant programs.⁷ First, the Adolescent and Family Life Act, conceived in 1981 as Title XX of the Public Health Service Act, offers both demonstration and research grants for public and private non-profit organizations that provide care and prevention programs to adolescents in the range of 9-14 years; in 2006, the Office of Population Affairs allocated \$30.7 million for these



Financial Benefits

One of the best predictors of financial success in the U.S. is an individual's level of lifetime academic achievement. Generally, those who enroll and succeed in higher education enjoy high rates of return

to their investment.⁹⁹ Consider the following chart of median income earnings by level of education in 2003. As the chart shows, higher levels of education correspond to greater annual income.



Teen Sexual Activity, Educational Investment, and Academic Performance

Early sexual debut is generally not viewed as a direct cause of poor academic achievement; however, making better grades or having higher educational aspirations is associated with the postponement of sexual intercourse.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, "the practice of sexual abstinence is likely to serve as a protective barrier which insulates the teenager from disruptive and negative influences and enables the teen to better focus on the immediate academic performance and longer-term life goals."¹⁰¹

Sexual activity, as it relates to educational

investment and academic performance, must be examined in the context of the adolescent's perceived environment, self-awareness, value system, adherence to conventional standards of behavior, and societal and familial influence. Self-awareness and perceived environment play important roles in this process. If adolescents realize the academic environment is not compatible with sexual activity, performance and school belonging decline, and focus is placed elsewhere. Thus, early sexual debut may have negative affects on adolescent academic performance by luring them from educational pursuits to sexual activities, with their immediate reward.¹⁰²