Benefits of Delaying Sexual Debut

the Institute for Youth Development
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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 1990\(^1\) 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.\(^9^9\) 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.

### Median Income Earnings by Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Median Income (2003)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree</td>
<td>$96,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>$79,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>$60,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>$52,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>$40,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College, No Degree</td>
<td>$35,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>$31,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a High School Graduate</td>
<td>$21,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Adapted from College Board (2004)

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### 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.\(^1^0^0\) 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.”\(^1^0^1\)

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.\(^1^0^2\)