

Dr. Stan Weed is director of the Institute for Research & Evaluation and a leading researcher on abstinence education. He is author of a chapter on abstinence education in the forthcoming handbook, *Sex Education* (www.novapublishers.com). We interviewed him about his research.

What are the key predictors of a teenager's decision to delay sexual involvement?

Stan Weed: Based on our surveys of tens of thousands of middle school and high school students, we find at least six important predictors:

1. Having the belief that abstaining from sex outside of marriage has important benefits.
2. Believing that you have positive opportunities in your future and that having sex could negatively affect those opportunities.
3. Not justifying sex as being okay "if you are in love," or "safe" as long as you use a condom, or as "a way to show you care for someone."
4. The ability to resist peer pressure which goes against your beliefs.
5. Personal efficacy—how confident you are that you can do what is necessary to delay sexual involvement.
6. Having the intention to abstain from sex.

What are the characteristics of effective abstinence education programs?

SW: Our analysis of over 100 abstinence programs finds that effective programs have "adequate dosage"—enough sessions to impact students more than superficially. Such programs also go beyond merely providing biological in-

Sex Education: What Works? An Interview with Stan Weed



formation and address multiple predictors of sexual behavior such as those I just mentioned.

They utilize effective teachers—who engage students, gain their respect, model the abstinence-from-sex-outside-marriage lifestyle, and believe in their ability to impact the sexual attitudes and behavior of their students. They are clear, direct, and unapologetic about the abstinence message.

These programs also recognize that risk behaviors such as sex, drug use, and drinking often occur in clusters and have common roots. Finally, effective programs conduct quality evaluation and use the data to improve the program.

Some have claimed that comprehensive sex education—including teaching how to use contraception—"works," but abstinence education doesn't. Could you comment on that?

We looked at 115 evaluation studies in *Emerging Answers*, a 2007 report which claimed that two-thirds of comprehensive sex education programs had "positive behavioral effects." But a close look at the data showed that *no* school-based comprehensive sex education program lowered teen pregnancy or STD rates for any period of time. After 12 months, only two programs delayed the onset of teen sexual intercourse, and only 3 of the 115 programs increased frequency of condom use. *No* program produced *consistent* condom use for even 6 months.

On the other side of the debate, evidence is emerging showing that well-designed abstinence education programs can be effective. Five peer-reviewed studies of abstinence education curricula have found positive effects still present one to two years after the program.

Heritage Keepers and *Reasons of the Heart*, a year after program participation, reduced the number of teens who became sexually active by about one-half. *Choosing the Best* showed a 60% reduction in teen sexual debut one year after the program.

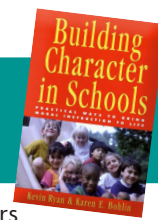
Sex Can Wait significantly delayed the onset of teen sex 18 months after the program. And *Promoting Health Among Teens!* (Abstinence-Only Intervention) significantly reduced teen sexual debut a full two years after the program.

So, if you use the criteria each side in the debate recommends—reduced sexual activity in the case of abstinence ed., and reduced pregnancy and STDs and consistent condom in the case of comprehensive sex ed.—and you follow the target group for at least 12 months, there is actually somewhat more evidence for abstinence education than for comprehensive sex education. ■

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Sex, Schools, and Social Suicide

Kevin Ryan, co-author
Building Character in Schools



Over the past three decades, social scientists, educational researchers, and pundits have probed for the reason why the U.S. is on the fringe of being a Third World country educationally. Why does the academic achievement of American students fall off during junior high and plummet during high school?

The "failure theories" are many: our schools are too big; our schools are too small; our school year is too short; our school day is too long; our teachers are undertrained or underpaid; our parents don't care; we don't give schools enough money. What's missing from these analyses, however, is the elephant in the room: sex.

For many young people today, parents and churches have much less influence in teaching about sex than they once did. For these kids, the media and the schools are now the primary shapers of sexual values. The media long ago learned that the best way to sell soap, cars, and beer is to show a little skin. As a result, today's screens are a virtual torrent of naked flesh. And galaxies of porn sites are just clicks away.

So, for countless American youth, this leaves our schools to pass on sexual wisdom. How are they doing? A casual stroll through the halls of many high schools reveals the sexual environment in which we are raising our children. F-bombs and sex-laced taunts ricochet in the halls, cafeteria, and locker rooms.

Nuzzling at lockers and fondling in the school's dark corners are a staple. Girls appear to be competing in a stripper's fashion show. Boys look like they are trying out for 1930-ish gangster movies.

Meanwhile, teachers and administrators drift through the halls like those see-no-evil-hear-no-evil monkeys. However, teachers and students alike are well aware of sexual bullying, swapping of porn sights, and cell phone sexting around the school.

How sexually active are U.S. students? Plenty active
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