

New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition

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COMPREHENSIVE VS. ABSTINENCE-ONLY SEXUALITY EDUCATION

This position paper states the views of the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition (NMTPC) on the current public discussion regarding *abstinence-only* education vs. *comprehensive* sexuality education.

Abstinence-only education focuses on encouraging teens to not have sex (usually until marriage) and does not address the contraceptive needs of teens who are, or will become, sexually active. *Comprehensive* sexuality education includes complete and medically accurate information about contraception and supports its use among sexually active people who do not desire a pregnancy. *Comprehensive* sexuality education is sometimes called *abstinence-based* or *abstinence-plus* sexuality education. In this paper we will use the term *comprehensive* sexuality education. Both approaches support and encourage abstinence; the major difference lies in the provision of medically accurate contraceptive information and encouragement of its use for sexually active teens.

Teen pregnancy results from a variety of complex factors that vary by community, gender, ethnicity, and by the individual. Since teen pregnancy often has serious and long lasting effects on the family, community and nation, it is important to provide prevention education to all young people. The question is, what specifically should youth be taught?

To date, scientific research indicates that only the *comprehensive* approach to sexuality education has demonstrated the ability to delay initiation of sexual intercourse or increase contraceptive use. Large amounts of public funding are currently being invested in *abstinence-only-until-marriage* education, despite the lack of research validating any significant impact on the initiation of sex or positive affect on sexual behavior.¹ Future evaluation of abstinence-only education could

lead to results that would justify our support, however, NMTPC is taking this position based on the current scientific knowledge and evaluation results.

After thoroughly reviewing the evaluation research on these two approaches to sexuality education, NMTPC takes the following position.

The New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition supports abstinence as a chosen lifestyle for male and female teenagers, especially those in mid or high school. Such a decision is an effective means of preventing pregnancy and may also provide protection against other physical and emotional consequences of early sexual initiation. However, since about 2/3 of teens become sexually active even before leaving high school, it is also necessary that we address their need for accurate information about contraception.² Even teenagers who are not currently sexually active need information about all methods of pregnancy prevention, so that they may prevent unplanned pregnancy at any point in their lives.

The New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition supports sexuality education that is comprehensive, appropriate in regard to age, culture and experience, encourages abstinence, and includes complete and medically accurate contraceptive information.

NMTPC's position on sexuality education reflects both the state of the current scientific research and the views of parents in New Mexico and the nation. In an October 2000 survey, New Mexico parents indicated overwhelming support for sex education that contains a strong message supporting abstinence and also includes information on contraception. More than 60% of parents with school-age children support teaching about contraceptives by the 7th/8th grade – more than 90% by the 12th grade.³

Effective pregnancy prevention education is not solely dependent upon the inclusion of contraceptive information – although it is a critical component – additional elements must also be included.

Research indicates that effective sexuality education programs include all of the following characteristics.

1. focus clearly on reducing sexual behaviors that led to unintended pregnancy or HIV/STDs;
2. are based on theoretical approaches demonstrated to be effective in influencing other health-related behaviors and identify specific important sexual antecedents to be targeted;
3. deliver and consistently reinforce a clear message about abstaining from sexual activity and/or using condoms or other forms of contraception. This appears to be one of the most important characteristics that distinguishes effective from ineffective programs.
4. provide basic accurate information about risks of teen sexual activity and about ways to avoid intercourse or using methods of protection against pregnancy and STDs;
5. include activities that address social pressures that influence sexual behavior;
6. provide examples of and practice with communication, negotiation, and refusal skills;
7. use teaching methods that involve students and help them personalize information;
8. incorporate behavioral goals, teaching methods, and materials that are appropriate to the age, sexual experience, and culture of the students;
9. last a sufficient length of time to complete important activities;
10. select teachers or peers who believe in the program and then provide them with adequate training.¹

Preventing too early pregnancy is not solved by picking any one “magic bullet” intervention. Teen

pregnancy prevention will require putting together the best combination of interventions.

Research also indicates that:

- comprehensive sexuality education does not encourage teens to start having sexual intercourse nor does it increase their frequency of sexual intercourse;
- programs must take place before young people begin experimenting with sexual behaviors if they are to result in a delay of sexual intercourse;
- teenagers who start having intercourse following comprehensive sexuality education are more likely to use contraceptives than those who have not participated in such a program;
- no single intervention will work for all teens;
- no single intervention will work for all the teen years (due to the enormous difference between a 13 year old and 19 year old);
- information alone is not enough to change behavior, teens need life skills to make good choices.
- the best sexuality education programs will increase a teen's capacity *and* motivation to prevent pregnancy.
- strong parent/child relationships help prevent teen pregnancy.
- young people who experience success in school are less likely to be involved in a pregnancy.⁴

The New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition believes that adolescents need support and values from their family and religious institutions, schools that are committed to student success, adequate health care, a life free from poverty, and a community that encourages their dreams for a real future.

Endnotes:

¹ Douglas Kirby, Ph.D., *Emerging Answers*, May 2001

² The 1999 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (YRBS) indicates that half of all 9-12th graders have had sexual intercourse, however, by 12th grade that statistic rises to 65%.

³ NMTPC statewide survey, *TUNE IN: New Mexico Attitudes on Sex Education*, 2001. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy national survey, 2001.

⁴ Susan Philliber, Ph.D., August, 1999; *Creating and Evaluating Successful Teen Pregnancy Programs*; and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

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