



Features

Teaching abstinence

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As studies question its effectiveness, more schools expand curriculums

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In a perfect world, our children would just say no to sex before marriage.

But life is much more complicated than that. A recent study conducted for the Department of Health and Human Services found that students taking abstinence-only classes were just as likely to have sex as those who didn't take such classes.

With abstinence-only programs in the spotlight recently, Planned Parenthood of Mid and South Michigan is sponsoring the screening of a movie on the issue at 6:45 p.m. Tuesday at the Vickers Theatre in Three Oaks.

Dr. Mitzi Kalin, a psychologist who works at Psychology Associates in St. Joseph and Freedom Counseling in Benton Harbor, says the approach that abstinence education takes is often somewhat simplistic.

"I like abstinence education," she says, "but I think it has to be part of an overall comprehensive reproductive health education program.

"You can't tell adolescents that something is bad and leave it at that."

Kalin, who is the mother of two young children, compares it to her 2-year-old son trying to play with the light socket. Just telling him no doesn't work.

"You have to help them see how sex can impact their lives and keep them from achieving their goals," she says. "It's an ongoing process."

According to Lori Lamerand, chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood in Mid and South Michigan, study after study shows that abstinence-only education is mostly a failure. The only thing that really works to prevent teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases is comprehensive sex education and access to contraceptives, she says.

"The most recent study done by Johns Hopkins shows that teens who pledge to remain virgins until marriage are just as likely to have premarital sex as those who don't, and they are significantly less likely to use birth control," Lamerand says.

"Abstinence-only programs do absolutely nothing to prevent the spread of STDs and HIV," she says.

"When one in four Michigan teen girls has an STD, using abstinence-only education is like spending money on smoke alarms for a house that's already on fire. At a time when our economy is so very fragile, it's disappointing to see the state of Michigan invest so much money in a program that is a proven failure."

Probably the most public example of teenage pregnancy is Bristol Palin, the daughter of vice presidential candidate and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. Gov. Palin has been a strong advocate of abstinence-only programs.

Bristol Palin became pregnant at age 17 and gave birth in December. Just recently it was announced that she and the baby's father, Levi Johnston, were no longer planning to wed.

In some ways, Bristol is one of the lucky unwed mothers in that she has a supportive family with the financial resources to raise the child.

On the other hand, the type of media attention she has received can make teenage pregnancy look a lot more glamorous than it is for the majority of girls.

Bill Albert, a spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, is quoted in a recent New York Times article as saying that breakups like that of Palin and Johnston are not rare at all. He noted that fewer than 8 percent of teenage mothers marry the fathers of their babies within a year. Those that do are twice as likely to divorce as women who wait to marry until 25.

St. Joseph Public Schools presents abstinence education as part of its comprehensive reproductive health instruction, says Gregg Schaffer, health and physical education teacher at the high school.

"The curriculum covers anatomy, psychology, information on communicable diseases, and the risks of being sexually active in both physical and emotional terms," he says. "We have an emphasis on abstinence, but it is part of a comprehensive program that also includes appropriate information on birth control. But we do stress that the abstinence is the healthiest."

At Lakeshore Public Schools, according to Ellen Rudy, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, they teach abstinence as an effective approach to preventing pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases but also go beyond an abstinence-only approach.

"We have an active parent community," says Rudy, noting that the district has assembled a community committee that includes parents, clergy, educators and a doctor to act, in part, as a sounding board. "We have a sense from our community that having a more comprehensive program is the way to go."

Three years ago, Bridgman Public Schools changed its reproductive health program from an abstinence-only to an abstinence-based curriculum after reviewing all the available options.

"Abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way of preventing pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases," says Kevin Ivers, superintendent of Bridgman Public Schools. "But our curriculum also discusses HIV/AIDS and birth control options."

He noted that Bridgman teachers receive 20 hours of training through Berrien RESA on teaching reproductive health issues.

Dr. Rick Sulier, owner of Psychology Associates, cites an article by Anna Quindlen in Newsweek to show why students need more than just abstinence-only education.

"According to Quindlen," Sulier says, "Texas leads in national spending for abstinence-only programs - and it also has one of the highest teen birthrates in the country."

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