



Abstinence-Only Education

The sole purpose of abstinence-only education is to promote abstinence from sex until marriage.

Federal Sources of Abstinence-Only Education Funding

Between 1996 and 2007, Congress funneled over 1.7 billion state and federal dollars to abstinence-only programs.¹ Currently abstinence-only program funding totals \$176 million per year.²

- Title V of the Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—In 1996, Congress allocated \$50 million per year in federal funds for abstinence education as part of “welfare reform” legislation.³ To receive Title V funding, states must match every four federal dollars with three state-raised dollars and use the money to follow an eight-point definition of abstinence only education. The eight points required to be covered in abstinence-only education are defined under Title V § 510(b).⁴ Abstinence-only programs must teach the gains of abstaining from sexual activity, the expectation that sexual activity occurs only between two (heterosexual) married people, and that having out-of-wedlock children will result in harmful consequences. Programs must also teach that everyone should be self-sufficient before engaging in sexual activity and also teaches tactics for rejecting sexual advances. The funding also requires programs emphasize that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of all human sexual activity” and that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.”⁵ As of July 2008, 22 states and Washington D.C. have rejected Title V funding, a growing trend.⁶
 - In early 2009, Florida introduced a bill that would reform their sexual education to include information about condoms, contraceptives, and STD prevention. Florida introduced this bill in response to studies that found Florida to be amongst the top three states for teen pregnancy, has the second most cumulative AIDS cases of all states, and had more abortions than forty-two of forty-four reporting states.⁷
- Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE)—Through the Administration on Children and Families, the federal government awards grants directly to state and local organizations to fund abstinence-only education. CBAE-funded programs are also required to emphasize the eight-point abstinence-only standard as defined in Title V.⁸ In 2007, such programs received over 100 million dollars in federal funding.⁹
- Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA)—Conservative lawmakers enacted AFLA to encourage “chastity” and “self-discipline” among U.S. teenagers. Under AFLA, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) grants over \$13 million per year to abstinence-only education programs.¹⁰ Since 1997, DHHS has required AFLA programs to comply with Title V’s eight-element definition of “abstinence education.”¹¹
- Other Sources—Additional funding goes to abstinence-only education under the guise of STD/AIDS prevention or through earmarks for state abstinence-only programs.¹²

The Effects of Abstinence-Only Education

- No conclusive evidence exists to indicate that teens who participate in abstinence-only programs abstain from intercourse longer than others.¹³
 - In a study commissioned by Congress, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. found that abstinence-only education does not decrease the likelihood that teenagers will have sex. Nor does it increase the chance that sexually active teens will use condoms.¹⁴
- A 2004 Congressional review of three widely used curricula found pervasive factual inaccuracies surrounding condom use, false information about the risks of abortion, blurring of religion and science, and gender stereotypes treated as scientific fact.¹⁵ In 2006, the U.S.

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Government Accountability Office issued a statement to the DHHS that federally funded abstinence-only programs must provide medically accurate information about condom effectiveness.¹⁶

- A recent study of abstinence-only pledge-takers revealed that after five years, 82% denied ever having made an abstinence pledge. Those who have taken an abstinence pledge are just as likely to contract STDs, but are 10% less likely to use a condom and 6% less likely to use any form of contraception when compared to their non-pledging counterparts.¹⁷ 88% of teens who take a pledge of abstinence from sex before marriage break that pledge.¹⁸
 - SIECUS found that students who pledge abstinence are six times more likely to have oral sex and four times more likely to have anal sex than their non-pledging peers. These at-risk teens are also one-third less likely to use contraceptives if they do become sexually active.¹⁹
- 63% of U.S. high school seniors have had sexual intercourse.²⁰ A third have had no formal education on contraceptives. Among young people of color, only one-third have had the benefit of such education.²¹
 - Each year, approximately 9.1 million 15- to 24-year-olds are infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), accounting for almost one-half of the total new STDs occurring annually in the U.S.²² The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention estimate that one-half of all new HIV infections occur among people under age twenty-five, with the majority contracted through sexual intercourse.²³
 - About 750,000 pregnancies occurred among U.S. women ages 15 to 19 in 2005.²⁴ The U.S. has the highest rate of teen pregnancy among developed countries.²⁵
- Abstinence-only curricula perpetuate sexist, harmful gender stereotypes. Abstinence-only programs often emphasize that girls dislike sex and charge them with helping curb boys' rampant sexual impulses.²⁶ One text instructs girls to "wear modest clothing that doesn't invite lustful thoughts."²⁷
 - Most abstinence-only curricula do not adequately address rape, sexual assault, or coercion. Additionally, in teaching that girls have responsibility for controlling male sexual urges, they offer excuses for sexual violence and promote victim-blaming attitudes.²⁸
 - Abstinence-only texts commonly portray women as naturally submissive and sexually passive, which contributes to social stigma relating to female sexual agency. This increases the likelihood that girls will engage in risky sexual behavior such as unprotected sex.²⁹
- Title V funding targets low-income populations, so abstinence-only programs have a disproportionate impact on young people of color. Similarly, low-income schools can rarely afford to refuse resources provided by AFLA or CBAE programs, increasing the odds that young people of color will receive inaccurate, incomplete information about sex, contraception, and STDs.³⁰
 - While only about 19% of white teens become pregnant, 51% of African-American teens and 53% of Latina teens become pregnant.³¹
- CBAE's guidelines, as rewritten in 2006, urge abstinent young people to avoid socializing with sexually active peers, devalue single motherhood, and discourage contraceptive use.³²

How do abstinence-only education programs affect LGBTQIQ youth?

Much of the abstinence-only curriculum marginalizes LGBTQIQ students by teaching that sexual activity does not belong outside the context of a marriage.

- Since same-sex couples are prohibited from marrying in most states, this curriculum denies the legitimacy of LGBTQIQ sexuality.



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- Abstinence-only curricula fail to provide information to students about how to protect themselves in same-sex sexual relationships, putting LGBTQIQ youth at heightened risk for STDs and HIV/AIDS.
- The 2006 rewrite of CBAE's guidelines requires that programs define marriage "only as a legal union between a man and a woman as a husband and wife."³³

Americans Support Comprehensive Sex-Ed

The vast majority of Americans support comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate sex and sexuality education.

- Most parents of junior high school and high school students (93% and 91%, respectively) say that sex education is a "very" or "somewhat" important part of a school's curriculum.³⁴
- Most parents of junior high school and high school students (85%) believe use of and access to contraceptives are appropriate topics for sexuality education programs in schools.³⁵
- 72% of junior high school students' parents and 65% of high school students' parents want federal funding for "more comprehensive sex education programs that include information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraceptives" instead of funding programs that teach "abstaining from sexual activity" as the only form of birth control.³⁶
- The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the American Medical Association all support teaching comprehensive sex education rather than abstinence-only education.³⁷
- A number of major religious organizations also support comprehensive sexuality education. The Episcopal Church USA,³⁸ Presbyterian Church (USA), Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and Reform and Conservative Judaism have all passed resolutions in favor of comprehensive sexuality education in public schools.³⁹
- In a national poll, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice found that 73% of anti-choice voters, 73% of Catholics, 57% of Baptists, and 67% of Christian fundamentalists favored comprehensive sexuality education.⁴⁰

¹ No More Money for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education, Brief History of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education, <http://www.nomoremoney.org/index.cfm?pageid=947> (last visited Feb. 26, 2009) [hereinafter No More Money].

² Critics Push to End Abstinence-Only Sex Education, FOXNEWS.COM, January 18, 2009, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,480605,00.html>.

³ Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2353 (1996).

⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 510(b) (1996).

⁵ Maternal & Child Health Services Block Grant, 42 U.S.C. § 710(b)(2) (2008).

⁶ Federal Abstinence Only Funding Refused by Twenty-Two States and D.C., FEMINIST DAILY NEWS WIRE, July 2, 2008, <http://feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=11118>.

⁷ Matt Clark, POLL: Proposed Bill Would Bring Contraceptive Education to Schools, Macro Eagle, Feb. 25, 2009, available at <http://www.marconews.com/news/2009/feb/25/proposed-bill-would-bring-sex-education-middle-sch/>.

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⁹ No More Money, *supra* note 1.

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¹² *Id.*

¹³ No More Money for Abstinence-Only-Before-Marriage Education, Harmful Consequences, <http://www.nomoremoney.org/harmful.html> (last visited Feb. 26, 2009).



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