

What Benefit?

How abstinence only sex ed hurts teens

By Meryl

Are you aware that the United States is the only developed country that provides federal funding for abstinence only sex education programs? Well, why aren't there other nations choosing to educate teens this way? It's probably because abstinence only programs have never been proven effective. In fact, they usually result in a higher amount of premarital sex and complications like STDs, infections, and unplanned pregnancies. Abstinence only programs are not just incomplete, they are often misleading. In addition to presenting religious opinion as fact (in public schools), they frequently provide false information on contraception, such as "For condoms to be used properly, over 10 specific steps must be followed every time which tends to minimize the romance and spontaneity of the sex act." ("Choosing the Best"). It is messages like this that often causes students who receive this type of education to forego contraception completely when they do have sex. In some instances, girls have been provided with diagrams of female anatomy that don't include a clitoris. These programs support a don't-ask-don't-tell mentality that assumes if we don't tell teens about sex, they won't think about it.

So why are these programs still supported by the public? The fact is that they *aren't*. A mere 15% of Americans think abstinence only sex Ed should be taught in schools, but these programs are still the choice of our government. In theory, our democratic government should be representing the views and needs of the people. In theory, I suppose a lot of things work. No matter what public opinion may be, over half a billion dollars have been spent on abstinence only programs since 1997 and the Bush Administration hopes that by 2008 funding will reach \$270 million. Bush claims he wants to reduce the occurrence of unwanted teen pregnancy, an obvious view for anyone of the pro-life persuasion as no unwanted pregnancy means no need for abortion, however the only programs shown to reduce the amount of unwanted teen pregnancy are those that teach students how *not* to become pregnant if they do have sex. Since almost half of teens aged 15-19 have had sex, abstinence education or no abstinence education, teens need to know how to take care of themselves.

The common argument against medically accurate, comprehensive sex education programs is that they encourage teenagers to have pre-marital sex and be promiscuous (the same argument used against the HPV-16 vaccine). These programs still have a strong emphasis on abstinence, but they have taken into account the reality that a considerable portion of young adults do choose to have sex. It has been repeatedly proven that students who receive abstinence only education are more likely to become sexually active before marriage, are more likely to have multiple partners and are more likely to contract STDs or have an unplanned pregnancy. It's really ironic when abstinence programs answer teen questions like "What if I want to have sex before I get married?" with, "Well I guess you just have to be prepared to die. And you'll probably take your spouse and one or more of your children with you." ("No Second Chance" video) A person taking this class would be more likely to have unprotected sex and contract something life-threatening like AIDS, or allow a treatable disease like Syphilis or Chlamydia to progress to a health or life threatening stage, than a student given a medically accurate class.

We live in a country where there are huge arrays of options to prevent pregnancy and the spread of STDs, and beyond that, options for treatment when those methods fail. We also live in a world where people have sex. Period. Though it is, of course, always safest to choose not to, that's simply not the option most people and almost half of the teenage population choose. It is undeniably important to show young people all their options, to let them know the risks and preventative measures that apply to activities they choose to participate in. Right wing groups argue that both evolution and intelligent design theories be taught in public schools to show students both sides of the argument, so shouldn't we be showing students every side of their sexual health, too? We deserve not only the truth, but the whole truth.