

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Just Say Know! Unmasking Hidden Agenda Behind Abstinence-Only Programs

In recent years, hundreds of millions of federal dollars has been poured into unproved abstinence-only programs for teens. While many parents teach their children the value of abstinence, the groups behind abstinence-until-marriage programs—including the extremist Family Research Council and Human Life International—have their own agenda. They oppose reproductive choice and women's equality and seek to make their religious beliefs the law of the land. Make no mistake—they don't represent most people of faith, who overwhelmingly support reproductive options and accurate information about sexuality.

'Gift of God'

Religious support for comprehensive sexuality education is long-standing. In 1968, influential Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish organizations jointly released a statement calling for the involvement of religious institutions in sexuality issues. Affirming that "Human sexuality is a gift of God, to be... used with reverence and joy," they advised each community of faith to provide "resources, leadership and opportunities as appropriate" for sexuality education in the light of their religious tradition.

Today, support for comprehensive sexuality education is at an all-time high. The American Baptists, Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church and Reform and Conservative Judaism are among denominations that have passed resolutions affirming the need for sexuality education, both within their own faith and in the public schools. These resolutions are often passed at the national meetings of the denominations and are meant to guide local congregational action.

All Faiths Support Sex Education

A national poll of 900 voters commissioned by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) found that Americans of all faiths want comprehensive sexuality education taught in schools. Seventy-three percent of anti-choice voters, 73% of Catholics, 57% of Baptists, and 67% of fundamentalists and evangelicals said they favor teaching comprehensive sexuality education. Support is similarly high among Protestant and Jewish religious leaders. For example, a Religious Coalition survey of nearly 500 clergy showed that more than 90% believe individuals can benefit from discussions of sexuality issues in worship services, youth groups, religious school, and adult education. African-American pastors are among the most supportive, with 80% agreeing that sexuality issues should be a part of Christian education.


Abstinence-only programs

- teach abstinence from all sexual activity as the only morally correct option for unmarried people of any age,
- censor information on contraception for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies that young people need to make informed, responsible decisions and
- May instill fear, shame, and guilt to control young people's sexual behavior.

Comprehensive sexuality education

- emphasizes the benefits of abstinence while also teaching about contraception and disease-prevention methods,
- provides developmentally appropriate information on a broad range of topics including sexual development, interpersonal relationships, and reproductive health.

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What's the Difference?

Hundreds of millions of dollars have gone to unproved abstinence programs since 1981, when the Adolescent Family Life Act was introduced. In 1996, the federal government attached a provision to the welfare reform law establishing a \$250-million entitlement program for abstinence education over five years; \$50 million more was made available in 1999. Funded programs are required to adhere to a strict eight-point definition, which requires them to teach that "sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful; psychological and physical effects."

To date, there is no proof that abstinence-only programs delay the onset of sexual intercourse. On the other hand, numerous studies suggest that comprehensive sexuality education that includes abstinence helps young people delay sexual intercourse, reduces the frequency of intercourse and the number of partners, and increases the use of condoms and other forms of contraception. Research has also consistently found that discussing contraception does not increase sexual behavior.

Religion's Important Role

Churches and synagogues have an important role in sexuality education. They are the only community institutions specifically charged with bringing an openly moral perspective to their work with youth. While responsibility for sexuality education belongs primarily to parents or guardians, many families would like assistance from religious institutions in communicating values and norms.

What You Can Do

Abstinence is a healthy choice for adolescents. However, data has consistently shown that at least 50 percent of high school students have engaged in sexual intercourse. That is why all young people need the information, skills and access to services to make and carry out informed, responsible decisions about their sexuality. Abstinence programs deny young people this information and may actually discourage contraceptive use.

Get Informed.

- Find out about sexuality education and abstinence-only programs in your schools and community.

Get Involved.

- Contact your local Religious Coalition affiliate or other advocacy organization.
- Ask religious leaders to discuss the issue with their congregation.
- Give a talk about the issue in your own church or synagogue.
- Encourage your local PTA to get involved.

Become an Advocate.

- Write a letter to the editor, speak before your school board, contact a reporter, ask your church or synagogue to print a newsletter article, develop a resolution for your denomination's meeting.

Resources

- "Keeping It Real!" is the Coalition's unique faith-based sexuality education curriculum for African American churches
- Many RCRC members have developed sexuality education curricula. These include:
 - Presbyterian Church (USA)-- *God's Gift of Sexuality: Study for Young People in the Reformed Tradition in the Presbyterian Church (USA), God's Plan for Growing Up,*
 - "In God's Image Unitarian Universalist Assn. and United Church of Christ--*Our Whole Lives (OWL): A Lifespan Sexuality Education Series*
 - United Methodist Church--*Created by God: About Human Sexuality for Older Girls and Boys, Our Sexuality: God's Good Gift, Male and Female: Blessed by God*

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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