

Promoting Positive Behavior

Abstinence Education Programs Reach Minority Youth

By Kauthar B. Umar, M.A.

Closing the Gap, Maternal Health • January/February 2004

Eighteen-year-old Ruth Adams is proud to be a part of a growing trend among America's teens. "I used to think that being a virgin was kind of stupid," Adams said. "But abstaining from sex is great: you feel like you're on top of the world, that you know you are worth waiting for."

Adams is among the young leaders who are reaching out to minority communities and schools across the country in an attempt to boost self-esteem and lower teen pregnancy rates. Despite raging hormones and peer pressure, their message, sexual abstinence, is catching on, and the messengers are often the teens themselves.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the teen birth rate has declined slowly but steadily from 1991 to 2002—dropping 28 percent since 1990. The largest decline was for African American women, with African American teens, ages 15 to 19, falling 42 percent. Hispanic teen birth rates also declined 20 percent between the same periods.

Despite these declines, however, about 850,000 teens become pregnant each year, of which, eight in ten are unintended. The rates of both Hispanics and African Americans remain higher than for other groups, with Hispanic teens now having the highest teenage birth rates.

As a result, various initiatives have been developed to reduce behavior leading to unintended pregnancies among at-risk youth, nationwide.

President Bush's Fiscal Year 2005 budget would increase funding for abstinence education programs to more than \$270 million. In his State of the Union address, the President directed HHS to develop research-based standards for model abstinence education curricula, and called for a review of Federal programming for youth addressing teen pregnancy prevention, family planning, and STD and HIV/AIDS prevention to ensure that the Federal government is sending the right messages to teens. He also announced a public education campaign designed to help parents communicate with their children about the health risks associated with early sexual activity.

"Abstinence from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases," said Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy Thompson in a statement last year. "Education supporting an abstinence-until-marriage message is a positive development in our nation's efforts to help adolescents avoid behaviors that could jeopardize their futures."

To successfully reach youth, the administration has focused on ways to filter the pregnancy prevention and abstinence message into the nation's school system. While opinions vary on the type of sexuality education schools should offer, 91 percent of parents want schools to teach that "adolescents

should be expected to abstain from sexual activity during high school years," according to the January 24, 2004 published poll results conducted by Zogby International.

In response, HHS funds more than 700 abstinence education programs nationwide. Along with abstinence-until-marriage messages, many include educational and cultural enrichments and teach about healthy friendships and marital relationships.

"Abstinence education is more than telling teens not to have sex. It is teaching young people how to set goals, make healthy decisions and build healthy relationships. Young people who are equipped

with these skills generally make the healthiest decisions about sex," said Dr. Alma Golden, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Affairs.

One such program is ReCapturing the Vision International (RTV), which has reached more than 5,500 at-risk teens and pre-teens in southern Florida within the past eight years.

RTV targets African American, Haitian and Hispanic sixth through twelfth graders through a three-tier approach focusing on school, home and community. Offered as an elective course throughout the academic year, RTV's Vessels of Honor curriculum addresses the underlying reasons for risk-taking and teaches kids the skills they need to make tough choices. Students are taught about character, image, marriage, wedding planning, goal setting and how to value their virginity as they transition into adulthood.

According to founder and CEO Jacqueline Del Rosario, RTV does not just teach teens to say no to sex, but teaches them to value themselves and embrace their future.

"ReCapturing the Vision has become that one voice that tells kids that they do not need to have sex, nor do they have to," said Rosario in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Health last year.

In an attempt to take abstinence education outside of the classroom and into the community, RTV also partners with corporations, community organizations and state agencies to host concerts, conferences, rallies, training workshops and after-school programs.

Adams, who was named Ms. RTV in 2002 for progress in community service and academics, attended the "teen empowerment" workshops last year.

"They talked about how you can prepare for your future," she said. "They talked about parents and how you have to talk to them in order for them to know how to help you. They also encouraged you to abstain from sex for a better future."

Though encouraging teens to value their future is no easy feat, programs that introduce abstinence as the best form of pregnancy prevention and a tool to gain more opportunities have been quite successful.

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Secretary Tommy Thompson
Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)



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Within the past year alone, the Pima Youth Partnership (PYP) founded in 1990, has introduced similar abstinence strategies to over 2000 rural youth in Pima County, Arizona. Home to 21 American Indian tribes, Arizona is currently tied for second in the country for the highest rate of births among 15- to 19-year-olds, according to the Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting.

In an effort to reduce the birth numbers, PYP educators visit health, science and social studies classes throughout the county to teach delay and resistance skills, and discuss the impact media, peers and parents have on teens and sex. Using the “Why Am I Tempted” (W.A.I.T.) training curricula, sixth through 12th graders discuss HIV/AIDS, refusal skills, marriage and parenting. The fourth and fifth grade curriculum, “Managing Pressures before Marriage,” discusses values and teaches decision-making.

“In ‘Managing Pressures before Marriage,’ kids are asked to identify three ways to delay having sex, two reasons why it’s important to delay, and then they practice those skills,” said Dr. Luan E. Wagner, the executive director of PYP. “By the end of the classes, kids talk about what they’ve learned. They remember and are better informed.”

A condensed version of the PYP program is incorporated each summer into the

Tohono O’odham three-week cultural camp, Truck of Love (TOL). For the past eight years TOL has enrolled 60 youth annually for life skills and peer leadership development training. The abstinence curricula is incorporated into education about O’odham legends, cultural rights and traditional O’odham language, cooking and art.

According to Wagner, using culturally appropriate messages has proved to be the most effective way to teach abstinence.

“In one of the tribes, our definition of family really bothered the kids, so we adapted family and marriage to mean what it does in their tribe,” Wagner said.

In the Tohono O’odham culture, a man and a woman can create a family without what western society considers a formal ceremony, stated Wagner. By discussing the definition of family and how it relates to their tribe, Wagner said the children concluded that it is most important to be faithful.

“We have to recognize cultural differences and variety, and so does Congress, if we want to get this right.”

For more information on ReCapturing the Vision, call 305-232-6003 or go to <http://www.recapturingthevision.org> ❖

For more information on the Pima Youth Partnership, call 520-744-9595 or go to <http://www.pyp.com> ❖

“What Do Parents Want Taught in Sex Education Programs?”

This recently released, nationally representative poll of parents with children under age 18 conducted by Zogby International in December 2003, shows that parents strongly support abstinence education. Some additional findings include:

- ◆ Seventy-nine percent of parents want teens to be taught to delay sexual activity until they are married or for an adult relationship leading to marriage.
- ◆ Ninety-one percent of parents want teens to be taught that sex should be linked to love, intimacy, and commitment and that these qualities are most likely to occur in marriage.
- ◆ Sixty-eight percent of parents want schools to teach teens that “individuals, who are not sexually active until marriage, have the best chances of marital stability and happiness.”
- ◆ Ninety-six percent of parents want teens to be taught that abstinence is best.

