

As teen abstinence message spreads, effectiveness lessens_122203

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By John Hall

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Signatures on many sexual abstinence commitment cards may not be worth the paper they are written on, according to a recent university study.

However, a Baptist who has led one of the nation's most prominent abstinence crusades contends those results are skewed, justifiably, by the ineffectiveness of programs that are not faith-based.

Researchers at Northern Kentucky University surveyed 527 students, 16 percent of whom made abstinence pledges. The study found 61 percent of those who made abstinence promises broke them before marriage. And even among the 39 percent who did not engage in vaginal intercourse, more than half did engage in oral sex.

On a more positive note, the study found pledge breakers engaged in sex a year later than non-pledging teens. However, the pledge breakers were less likely to use protection such as condoms when first having sex.

While the survey represents findings from a small segment of the population, it is one of the first studies of the effectiveness of virginity pledges. While the information should serve as a warning sign, further information is needed before nationwide conclusions can be drawn, said Angela Lipsitz, a professor who was involved in the study.

"It sends up cautions," she said. "I would say we need to be skeptical at this point. It is only one study. This is showing some interesting things, but I would like to see them replicated."

Richard Ross, a spokesman for the Southern Baptist-birthed abstinence effort True Love Waits, said the survey's findings did not surprise him.

After the enormous popularity of True Love Waits, the federal government began funding more than 200 abstinence programs that are used in the majority of school systems across the country. Often these efforts consist of a short lecture about reasons for abstinence and a request for students to sign a piece of paper in a notebook, he said. There is sparse follow up, and the pledge carries little weight.

"Even though I am very supportive of any programs that talk about abstinence, I think many of the pledges signed lack the power to shape long-term decisions," he said.

True Love Waits work is more effective, he said, because it adds an element secular efforts lack-God. He believes the addition of the supernatural gives the promise more power.

"Promising a notebook means almost nothing," Ross said. "Promising to God is extremely important to most young people."

True Love Waits works through local churches and with families, a key element in providing accountability, support and encouragement that differs from secular programs, Ross added.

Additionally, the larger gatherings sponsored by True Love Waits—such as stacking the pledge cards to the roof of the Georgia Dome in Atlanta or the upcoming collection of cards at the 2004 Olympics in Athens—provide celebratory occasions that help teens know they are not alone in their beliefs, Ross said.

These celebrations create a brotherhood among students and encourage them to be proud of their stance, said Ross, who started the movement at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Nashville in 1993 and now is a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

David Hager, director of the University of Kentucky-affiliated obstetrician and gynecology training program at Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington, Ky., affirmed Ross' belief in the necessity of continuous support for a pledge to be successful.

Supportive friends and family are key to encouraging young adults to stick to their promises, Hager said.

When an individual's support group becomes less supportive of a sexual purity pledge, the chances of keeping that oath drop drastically, he reported. "The teaching of abstinence and abstinence education is not a one-time event. It has to be a continuous thing."

Joe McIlhaney, director of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, a non-profit educational group based in Austin, goes even further to say that abstinence pledges should be renewed to keep them fresh on the teen's mind.

"The kids are really asking for help staying sexually abstinent," he said. "They just aren't receiving the support."

The effort to create a virginal community through True Love Waits has worked so well that it is cited as a factor behind a statistical national drop

in teen sexual activity each year since its inception. Today, slightly more than 50 percent of middle school and high school students are virgins, Ross said, and that's an improvement.

“Behavior is changing,” he said. “It has not changed for every teenager.”

Ironically, too much success may dilute the effectiveness of abstinence pledge programs, according to the government's 2001 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

As the number of pledges increases in a school, their effectiveness decreases, the study found. Researchers report that students are attracted to the pledges, in part, because they get a sense of community apart from their peers.

Even though secular abstinence programs are less effective than faith-based ones, the government should continue funding secular programs, Ross insisted. Not only are such programs morally right, they also save the government money on social services every time they prevent a teenager from getting pregnant.

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