

# Yes, abstinence is the best policy!

The opinions expressed in Drew Ober's "Is abstinence the best policy?" (*Wolfpack*, February 13) call for a response, so let me quote his main points and give my thoughts on each one.

## **"How is one to become educated on the risks and consequences of sexual activity if that person is simply discouraged from having sex?"**

LISD's sex education program directly addresses these topics, and has recently been updated to use the latest research and statistics from medical science. There is a large risk of permanent damage from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including infertility, genital warts, scars and even cancer and HIV. Each year, 15.3 million new STD infections occur.<sup>1</sup> Half (some say more) of STDs are in people 25 years old or younger<sup>2</sup> and one-fourth of sexually active teens have an STD.<sup>3</sup> The number of known STDs is increasing rapidly, with eight new pathogens identified since 1980, including HIV, and the count now standing at about 25.<sup>4</sup> HIV has already killed 500,000 Americans,<sup>5</sup> compared to 400,000 Americans killed in World War II. Condoms do not eliminate the risk of any STD, although effectiveness varies by disease. For example, condoms provide little protection from bacterial vaginosis and human papilloma virus,<sup>6</sup> and only 50% risk reduction for chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhea and syphilis, even when used 100% of time.<sup>7</sup>

## **"The portrayal of sex outside of marriage as a negative thing emotionally and psychologically seems to be based less on actual facts and more on the beliefs of a specific group."**

Teens who are not virgins are more likely to be depressed or attempt suicide.<sup>8</sup> Also, people who have sex before marriage are about 50% more likely to divorce than those who don't.<sup>9</sup> Divorce leads to single-parent families, of course, which in turn increase the risk of out-of-wedlock births and single-parent families in the next generation,<sup>10 11</sup> so the problems get worse with each generation.<sup>12</sup> For example, 7 of 10 adolescent mothers drop out of high school, teenage sons of adolescent mothers are 2.7 times more likely to drop out of high school, and over 80% of single mothers under 18 rely on welfare.<sup>13</sup> In short, many of our social problems have a root in premarital and teenage sexual activity.

## **Researchers "found no definite evidence that abstinence only education programs decrease sexual activity, pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases among US teens."**

There is plenty of evidence. Due to limited space, I just refer to some studies that show the benefits of abstinence education, and one summary of studies.<sup>14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25</sup> Programs that teach condom use have been in existence for years, but teen pregnancy and STD rates did not begin to fall until abstinence-based sex education began to proliferate in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

**Summary.** Believe me, it *can* happen to you. The consequences to your health, finances and emotions can be devastating. As Mr. Ober acknowledges, abstinence is the only sure-fire prevention.

In closing, let me add that, as a Christian committed to living according to God's plan, His position on the matter settles the question for me. However, to have the best chance of persuading all my readers, I have chosen to make no reference to Scripture.

- Jim Sneeringer

*Background: Dr. Sneeringer is a software consultant retired from IBM, an LISD board member since 1993, and has been board president four times. He has a son at CPHS.*

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<sup>1</sup> American Social Health Association. *Sexually Transmitted Disease in America: How Many Cases and at What Cost?* Menlo Park, Calif.: Kaiser Family Foundation; 1998.

<sup>2</sup> American Social Health Association, at [www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/statistics.html](http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/statistics.html).

<sup>3</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Sex and America's Teenagers* (New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994), pp. 19-20.

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- <sup>4</sup> Eng TR, Butler WT, eds. *The Hidden Epidemic - Confronting Sexually Transmitted Disease*. Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1997.
- <sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention, at [www.cdc.gov/hiv/stats.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/stats.htm). Accessed March 12, 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Medical Institute for Sexual Health, at [www.medinstitute.org](http://www.medinstitute.org), FAQ page. Accessed March 6, 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Medical Institute for Sexual Health, at [www.medinstitute.org/media/Monograph.htm](http://www.medinstitute.org/media/Monograph.htm). Accessed March 12, 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> Peterson, Karen S., "Study Links Depression, Suicide Rates to Teen Sex," *USA Today*, at [www.usatoday.com/news/health/2003-06-03-teen-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2003-06-03-teen-usat_x.htm). Accessed March 12, 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November 1991, pp. 845-855.
- <sup>10</sup> "Absent Fathers Faulted," *Duke Magazine*, July-August, 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Quigley, Ann, "Father's absence increases daughter's risk of teen pregnancy," Health Behavior New Service at [www.cfah.org/hbns/news/daughter05-14-03.cfm](http://www.cfah.org/hbns/news/daughter05-14-03.cfm).
- <sup>12</sup> Irwin Garfinkle and Sara McLanahan, The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, baseline report, at [crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/nationalreport.pdf](http://crrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/nationalreport.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Maynard, R.A. (ed.). (1996). *Kids Having Kids: A Robin Hood Foundation Special Report on the Costs of Adolescent Childbearing*. New York: Robin Hood Foundation.
- <sup>14</sup> Michael Resnick, M.D., et al., "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 278 (September 10, 1997), p. 830.
- <sup>15</sup> L. Kahn et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Survey--United States 1997," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*, Vol. 47 (SS-3), 1998, pp. 1-89
- <sup>16</sup> Andrew S. Doniger, "Impact Evaluation of the 'Not Me, Not Now' Abstinence-Oriented, Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Communications Program, Monroe County, New York," *Journal of Health Communications*, Vol. 6 (2001), pp. 45-60.
- <sup>17</sup> Elaine Borawski et al., *Evaluation of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs Funded through the Wellness Block Grant (1999-2000)*, Center for Health Promotion Research, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, March 23, 2001.
- <sup>18</sup> Stan E. Weed, *Title V Abstinence Education Programs: Phase I Interim Evaluation Report to Arkansas Department of Health*, Institute for Research and Evaluation, October 15, 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter S. Bearman and Hanna Bruckner, "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (January 2001), pp. 861, 862.
- <sup>20</sup> Stan E. Weed, *Predicting and Changing Teen Sexual Activity Rates: A Comparison of Three Title XX Programs*, report submitted to the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December, 1992.
- <sup>21</sup> Stan E. Weed, *FACTS Project: Year End Evaluation Report, 1993-1994*, prepared for the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programs.
- <sup>22</sup> Marion Howard and Judith Blarney McCabe, "Helping Teenagers Postpone Sexual Involvement," *Family Planning Perspectives*, January/February 1990, pp. 21-26.
- <sup>23</sup> Stephen R. Jorgensen, Vicki Potts, and Brian Camp, "Project Taking Charge: Six-Month Follow-Up of a Pregnancy Prevention Program for Early Adolescents," *Family Relations*, October 1993, pp. 401-406.
- <sup>24</sup> Stan E. Weed, Jerry Prigmore, and Raja Tanas, *The Teen Aid Family Life Education Project: Fifth Year Evaluation Report*, Institute for Research and Evaluation, 1992.
- <sup>25</sup> Rector, Robert E., *The Effectiveness of Abstinence Education Programs in Reducing Sexual Activity Among Youth*, Backgrounder #1533, The Heritage Foundation at [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1533.cfm#pgfId=1009720](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1533.cfm#pgfId=1009720)
- <sup>26</sup> Testimony of Joe S. McIlhaney, Jr., MD, President, The Medical Institute for Sexual Health, before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, U.S. House of Representatives, April 23, 2002.