

# Teens *Can Wait* Until Marriage

More young people are saying  
"yes" to sexual purity.

By Pamela Pearson Wong



Sixteen-year-old Abby Clezenger says “no”—to being sexually active, that is. A cheerful witness to the fact that everyone is not “doing it,” Abby has made the commitment to remain abstinent until she marries.

As a 10-year-old headed to summer camp, she and her parents sat down for the “birds and the bees” discussion.

“I remember my mom telling me that sex ... is totally awesome, but it's so awesome that it needs to be saved until marriage,” she says.

Abby is active in PALS (Promoting Abstinence Living Safely), a program of Operation Keepsake in Ohio, which she says reached 3000 students this past year.

At a monthly PALS meeting, Abby heard a young woman tell what it is like to live with herpes, an incurable sexually transmitted disease. At another, group members talked about why they wanted to remain pure for their future spouses.

Abby is also part of a PALS team that visits classrooms in the Cleveland area—primarily in public schools, but parochial and private, too, as well as church youth groups—to give an hour-long presentation that promotes abstinence until marriage.

“I know a couple of people who have been abstinent through high school and they are older now, in college,” Abby says. “One thing they will say over and over is that they have no regrets. When people question the effectiveness of abstinence programs, I always think of those people.”

### **What About Abstinence?**

The growing abstinence movement comprises a plethora of programs,

ranging from inspirational speakers to curricula to virginity pledge efforts. Some of the well-known programs include Sex Respect, Teen Aid and Best Friends.

Though the methods may vary, true abstinence programs “cast a vision of human sexuality that's different than the vision in popular culture,” says Robert Rector, senior research fellow for the Heritage Institute, a leading think tank in Washington, D.C. The bottom line: They encourage and equip young people to refrain from sex until marriage.

In the process, abstinence programs teach about the dangers of multiple sexual partners and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which are strongly linked. They build a foundation of character and values, and stress the importance of marriage. These programs are taught in public and private schools, through community-based efforts, in churches and in homes—where parents teach their children.

In contrast, “safe sex” programs teach young people to become sexually active when they feel ready—as long as they use condoms or other contraception.

There is no question that abstinence programs are increasing. Even the Guttmacher Institute, a promoter of “safe sex” programs, says that (much to its chagrin) abstinence programs now exist in 35 percent of public school districts nationwide!

Leslee Unruh, president of the Abstinence Clearinghouse, sees the growth nearly everyday. “Last year at our conference we had over 700 people and [representatives from]18 foreign countries. We are seeing the abstinence-until-marriage message ring



**Jamin Warren**  
**School: Harvard**  
**Year: Sophomore**

**On intimacy:**

What I've noticed is that my friends who are active sexually say, "Oh, I'm

physically intimate with this person, so I must be emotionally intimate with this person," but it doesn't necessarily work that way. It's much easier to have a physically intimate relationship than it is to have an emotionally intimate relationship with a person.

**Condom distribution:**

I know there's a movement to have both abstinence and "comprehensive" sex education taught at the same time. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to tell teenagers that the best thing in the world is to wait until you're married, but just in case, here's a condom and this is how to use it.

Carrying a condom around if you've promised yourself to be a virgin is sort of like an unspoken dissolution of a promise. It's like saying "I'm not going to eat chocolate" but carrying around a Hershey bar in your back pocket.

throughout the world."

Spurred on by increasing teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), abstinence programs received a boost when federal funding began in 1982, under President Ronald Reagan, through Title XX. Since 1996, they have also gained funding through the Welfare Reform Act, which includes Title V funding to reduce out-of-wedlock births—a primary cause of swelled welfare roles.

President George W. Bush has been a strong proponent, proposing this year to increase abstinence funding from \$82 million to \$135 million. Congress will likely pass the increase, but it remains only about half of the \$265 million the government provides for "safe sex" education and contraceptive and abortion "counseling" under Title X.

**Does it Work?**

The \$64,000 question is: Are abstinence programs effective in reducing teen pregnancies? "Safe sex" proponents claim that the jury is still out, but Rector disagrees. "The longer abstinence programs are with us, the more evidence we have," he says, citing 10 studies that show they reduce sexual activity.

He says that at least four more studies will be released within a year that will say the same thing. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is working on an \$8 million evaluation of federally funded abstinence programs that will be completed in 2004 or 2005.

"That any abstinence program working on only a few hours of contact can alter sexual behavior ... is most remarkable," Rector says. "[These programs] have had an impact not only on the kids that have been exposed to them, but they've contributed to a general change in our culture ... that has led to an overall reduction in teen sexual activity."

Statistics show that abstinence programs are working. In 1991, just nine years after the first federal funding of these programs, the rate of births to teen mothers began to

# The Truth About Condoms

In 2000, the National Institutes of Health convened a scientific review panel to evaluate research on the role of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The results must have disappointed many “safe sex” proponents.

Dr. Joe McIlhaney served as member of that review panel. “The point is, even with 100 percent use, there still is risk of disease,” he says.

The panel released a report in July 2001, which contained the following conclusions:

## **When condoms are used 100 percent of the time:**

- ★ There is no evidence they reduce the risk of many STDs, including chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhea for women, etc.;
- ★ There is no evidence they reduce the risk of infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV), the most

common STD and the primary cause of cervical cancer;

- ★ In a year, 15 percent of condom users may still contract HIV, which is generally fatal;
- ★ 25-75 percent of men may still contract gonorrhea annually.

## **Since release of the report, additional studies have shown that, when condoms are used 100 percent of the time:**

- ★ There is still a 50 percent chance each year of acquiring chlamydia, gonorrhea and, for women, syphilis.

## **Another study has shown that when someone uses a condom at least 65 percent of the time:**

- ★ There is still a 50 percent annual chance of contracting herpes.

decline. By 1997, that rate had dropped 19 percent—to the lowest level in 20 years—and it continues to drop. Further, in 1997 the abortion rate for women aged 15 to 19 was 33 percent lower than it had been 10 years earlier.

“It is less sex that is driving this,” says Shepherd Smith, president of the Institute for Youth Development.

Even the Guttmacher Institute acknowledges that abstinence programs have had an impact. It attributes 25 percent of the decline to abstinence programs and 75 percent to increased contraceptive use. However, Dr. Joe McIlhaney, an

obstetrician/gynecologist and founder of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, disputes the role of contraceptives in the decline.

In the late '80s, research showed that young people made a major switch from hormonal contraceptives, primarily the birth control pill, to condoms, which are much less successful in preventing pregnancy.

“So it seems unreasonable to me to attribute a large part of the decline to contraceptives,” McIlhaney says.

Liberal organizations also point to increased use of contraceptive implants Depo-Provera and Norplant. A recent study showed that 11 percent

of teens who use contraceptives use them.

"I don't think the data are adequate to cause this decline in the pregnancy rate," he says. "I believe the most significant change was the presence of abstinence programs."

The drop in teen sexual activity has encouraged even abstinence opponents to discuss "the value of kids waiting," according to Shepherd Smith. "[Abstinence education] has gained a great deal of credibility."

The safe sex community recognizes that abstinence programs are popular with parents. It has even attempted to co-opt the language, calling authentic abstinence programs "abstinence-only" and its own programs "abstinence-plus" (that means plus condoms).

This word twisting reveals the key strength of the abstinence movement: its unequivocal message. "We don't say to young people regarding alcohol, 'Don't drink, but if you drink, just drink beer and not hard liquor,'" Smith says. "It's an inconsistent message, 'Don't have sex, but if you do, protect yourself.'"

Smith says abstinence programs work hand-in-hand with parental influence to teach teens to save sex for marriage.

"Parent/child connectedness is the most powerful protective influence," he says. "Abstinence programs help young people develop filters and reinforce what their parents are saying. If they don't hear this outside the home, the message in the home has more opportunity to be eroded."

### **Tragic Legacy**

Although more teens are choosing

## **Janelle Briggs**

**Age: 16**

**State: Louisiana**



### **My future:**

I chose abstinence because I don't want to face the consequences of careless interaction with the opposite sex. My future is too important and so is my future spouse. I cannot justify giving myself to a man who has not committed himself to me in marriage.

### **Parental influence:**

I have seen through the lives of my parents that marriage is based on faithfulness. As a teenager, I have the opportunity today to be faithful in purity to the man I will one day marry. There is no better time to prepare for something than before you are called on to do it. Remaining abstinent lays the foundation for being a faithful spouse. What better track record to have than one that says, "I loved you enough to wait—before I ever knew you."

each year to say "no," millions of young people are living with the legacy of premarital sex: They are infected with an STD. In 1960, one in 47 teens had an STD. Today, the number is one in four, a statistic that crosses all social groups.

Incidences of some of the bacterial diseases, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, have dropped because they can be cured with antibiotics (though re-infection can occur). However, today's epidemic consists of viral STDs, such as human papillomavirus (HPV), chlamydia and herpes, which have no

cure. These diseases can lead to infertility, or an incompetent cervix and premature delivery in future pregnancies.

A shocking 50 percent of sexually active women aged 18-22 are infected with human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV can lead to abnormal Pap smears and cervical cancer, which kills 4,500 women each year.

“When I started practicing medicine in 1960, we almost never saw an adolescent with an abnormal Pap smear. Today doctors will tell you they have an epidemic of kids,” McIlhane says.

A recent study at the University of Wisconsin shows that from 1993 to 2001, mouth-type herpes has increased from 29 to 78 percent—which seems to corroborate that oral sex among teens and young adults is increasing.

The “safe sex” movement has relied primarily on condoms to prevent STDs. Conservatives have long pointed out their inadequacy, a concern documented by the National Institutes for Health condom study, which was released in 2000 (see sidebar, page 9).


Further, safe sex programs fail to address the tendency of sexually active teens to have sex with multiple partners, which is the greatest risk factor for contracting an STD.

### It's Time

Just as the abstinence movement has helped reduce teen pregnancies and abortions, and all the emotional, physical and economic problems they bring, abstinence leaders believe it will have a part in reducing rampant STDs.

With such a large pool of young

people currently infected, it will take years of increasing numbers of young people who are abstinent until marriage to turn STD rates around. But with the abstinence movement gaining influence in the lives of more young people all the time, reducing STDs seems more attainable than ever.

“We’re going to keep improving abstinence programs, studying them, finding those that are best, and I think we can drop the pregnancy and STD rates by 80 percent,” McIlhane says. “We’ve just got to do that.” 

*Pamela P. Wong is editor of Family Voice.*

*To learn more about the need for a strong abstinence message, read CWA's in-depth policy paper, *Abstinence: Why Sex is Worth the Wait*, available at <http://cwfa.org/abstinence>. Or call 800-323-2200 or use the coupon on page 38 to request your free copy.*

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- PRAY** that more and more teens will respond to the abstinence message.
- PRAISE** God for His perfect design for sex within marriage.
- ACT** Take this article and CWA's paper (see above) to your local junior or senior high school or school board meeting. Politely encourage the staff to consider offering an authentic abstinence program.