

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Just Say Know! Unmasking Hidden Agenda Behind Abstinence Education

In recent years, hundreds of millions of federal dollars have been poured into unproven abstinence-only education for teens. While many parents teach their children the value of abstinence, the groups behind abstinence-until-marriage education—including the extremist Family Research Council and Human Life International—have another agenda. They oppose reproductive choice and women’s equality and seek to make narrow 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 responsible sexuality education is long-standing. In 1968, influential Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish organizations released a joint 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 light of their religious tradition.

Today, support for responsible sexuality education is at an all-time high. The American Baptist Church, 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 Ed

A national poll of 900 voters commissioned by the Religious Coalition found that Americans of all faiths want responsible sexuality education taught in schools. Seventy-three percent of anti-choice voters, 73% of Catholics, 57% of Baptists, and 67% of Christian 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; 80% agree that Christian education should include sexuality issues.

Abstinence Only Education	Responsible Sexuality Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from all sexual activity as the only morally correct option for unmarried people of any age • on contraception and disease prevention that young people need to make informed, responsible decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of abstinence while also teaching about contraception and disease-prevention • developmentally appropriate information on a broad range of topics including sexual development, interpersonal relationships, and reproductive health.

What's The Difference?

Abstinence programs began in 1981, when the Adolescent Family Life Act was introduced. In 1996, the government attached a provision to the welfare reform law establishing a \$440-million entitlement program for abstinence education over five years. Funded programs must 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."

The effectiveness of abstinence-only programs in preventing teen pregnancy and delaying sexual intercourse is unproven. On the other hand, numerous studies suggest that responsible 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 major 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 half of high schools 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.

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 or 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.

Selected Resources

- "Keeping It Real!" the Coalition's unique faith-based sexuality education curriculum for African American churches
- 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,*"
- Unitarian Universalist Association and United Church of Christ--"In God's Image " *Our Whole Lives (OWL): A Lifespan Sexuality Education Series*
- The 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*

Sources: Advocates for Youth and Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), *Toward a Sexually Healthy America*, 2001; Debra W. Haffner, *A Time to Speak, Faith Communities and Sexuality Education*, SIECUS, 1998

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.

For more information, contact:
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1130
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202-628-7700 Fax: 202-628-7716
E-mail: info@rcrc.org Website: www.rcrc.org