

THE FAILURE OF ABSTINENCE-ONLY SEX EDUCATION

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (ngier@uidaho.edu)

With some American churches now hosting the Horrors of Hell rather than Halloween, one would assume that American teenagers would have more respect for sin and fewer instances of sexually transmitted diseases. But just as with President Bush's tactics in the War on Terror, uninformed fear is not doing the job.

Using figures from 1995-2000, Advocates for Youth (www.advocatesforyouth.org) reports that the HIV rate for Americans 15-24 is five times that of German youth of the age. The U.S. teen syphilis rate is six times higher than the Dutch; the chlamydia rate is 20 times that of French teens; and our teen gonorrhea rate is a whopping 74 times higher than the Dutch.

European programs that provide uncensored sex education and promote condom use are the reasons for this success. Contrary to what one might expect, European youth have fewer sex partners than Americans do and begin sex slightly later than Americans. What is alarming, however, is that America has the largest percentage of girls who have sex by age 15.

Coming from the Land of Amour and Brigitte Bardot, the following French statistics are indeed a surprise. Nearly 49 percent of American women 18-19 said that they had two or more sexual partners in the past year, whereas only 13 percent of French women the same age did.

The U.S. also has the highest teen birth rate among 28 developed countries. According to a UNICEF study, less than 10 per 100,000 teenage girls in Korea, Japan, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden gave birth in 2001, whereas 52 American teens per 100,000 did. Although the U.S. rate dropped to 42 by 2002, teen births in America's Bible belt remained high: 65 in Mississippi; 64 in Texas; 60 in Arkansas; and 58 per 100,000 in Georgia and Louisiana.

One could say that these figures are biased because other countries must have higher abortion rates than the U.S. does. But this not true. In 2003 there were 21

abortions per 1,000 women in the U.S., while the Western European average was 12 per 1,000.

Other countries achieve these good results without any national abstinence programs. Not surprisingly, recent studies have shown that abstinence-only programs have not worked. In a 2004 study of 12,000 teens who had taken an abstinence pledge, an astounding 88 percent said that they had nevertheless gone on to have sexual intercourse before marriage.

A University of Oxford study by Kristen Underhill of 16,000 young Americans found no difference in the number of pregnancies, STDs, and sexual partners in those who pledged chastity and those who didn't.

Underhill's follow-up study of "abstinence-plus" programs demonstrated many positive gains, particularly fewer pregnancies and more knowledge about AIDS. Significantly, this group had fewer instances of anal sex, which of course is, without a condom, the easiest means to transmit the HIV virus. Presumably, abstinence-only teachers thought it unseemly to mention this.

Evidently, many American teens have fudged on their vows of celibacy by using the Bill Clinton defense. A report released by the National Center for Health Statistics shows that over half of Americans 15-19 have engaged in oral sex. When virgin teens were asked this question, one in four answered in the affirmative.

Claire Brindis, a professor of pediatrics, suggests that today America's youth view oral sex as "far less intimate than intercourse. It's a different kind of relationship" (*Washington Post* 9-16-05).

Every year Congressional Democrats want to add more funds to Title X, the federal program for family planning. The specific legislation is entitled the Prevention First Act, and before 2006 the bill could not get out of committee. Perhaps that will change now, especially with the new studies demonstrating the failure of abstinence-only programs.

Fact-based, comprehensive sex education not only makes good socio-psychological sense, but it could also save money. Advocates for Youth has calculated

that if American pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates were brought down to European levels, the U. S. would save at least \$1 billion annually that would otherwise go to extra health costs and economic loss due to neglecting and misinforming America's youth.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Listen to or read his columns at www.NickGier.com.