

HEALTH

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The Many Messages About Teen Sex

Posing questions such as "Is Teen Sex Bad?" immediately puts both camps on the defensive, starting a proverbial shouting match that concludes with the most severe, hardened voices being heard above the silent majority. As a result, the message looks something like this: Teen sex is either "good" or "bad"; sexual health education should either exist in the tightly zipped (pardon the pun) abstinence-only-until-marriage tradition, or reminiscent of the free-spirited, '70s-esque sexual revolution. Lost in all this are well-researched, well-understood facts and consensus in the sexual health community.

While the bulk of parents, educators and medical care providers agree that teens should postpone sexual activity until adulthood, the reality of teen sexual behavior necessitates something more.

According to the D.C. Public Schools 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 48.1 percent of District teens reported being sexually active, with 11 percent of those teens having sex before the age of 13. These numbers should serve as a wake-up call that sexual health education must be dictated solely on best practices and research-based methods, not peripheral ideologies or fear.

Research shows, and the majority of parents and educators believe, that youth should be given complete and accurate information about abstinence, sexual risk and prevention methods for a range of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. It is time for public debate, policies and media coverage to shift away from the margins and catch up with research that has been consistently effective—existing, of course, somewhere in the middle.

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