Expert Review Shows Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Policies and Programs are Harmful and Ineffective for Adolescents and Young Adults

Oakbrook Terrace, IL – A new review published in the September issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (JAH) outlines the harm of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) policies and programs. The article was authored by 13 leading experts in adolescent health research and policy from a variety of institutions and organizations. It was published in conjunction with the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine’s (SAHM) updated position paper to include new scientific and human rights evidence about AOUM programs and refine SAHM’s recommendations.

“The science is clear. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are not only ineffective in promoting healthy behaviors, they may also be harmful to many different groups of youth,” said John Santelli, MD, MPH, lead author of both publications. “As a nation, we must do better to ensure young people are safe and healthy.”

The research review found that AOUM programs (now sometimes referred to as Sexual Risk Avoidance programs):

- are not effective in delaying initiation of sexual intercourse or changing other health behaviors associated with reducing unintended pregnancy and STDs, such as increasing the use of birth control among sexually active youth;
- may have negative impacts on several groups of young people including LGBTQ youth, sexually active youth, youth with a history of sexual abuse and parenting teens;
- reinforce damaging gender stereotypes;
- censor lifesaving information about the prevention of pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs;
- exclude accurate information about contraception; and
- undermine public health goals in the U.S. and globally. Promotion of these policies by the U.S. government has harmed other public health efforts, including family planning programs and HIV prevention abroad.

“While sexual abstinence can be a healthy choice for some adolescents, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are highly problematic,” says Laura Lindberg, review coauthor and Guttmacher principal research scientist. “These programs withhold important sexual health knowledge and provide medically inaccurate information that compromises young people’s healthy sexual development.”
In practice, AOUM programs fall short of their theoretical value of preventing pregnancy and STIs with abstinence. Many adolescents who intend on practicing abstinence fail to do so and often fail to use appropriate protection when they do have intercourse. Scientific research has definitively shown AOUM programs are ineffective at preventing pregnancy and STIs and do not have a positive impact on age at first sexual experience, number of partners or other important behaviors. Despite this evidence, the U.S. government has spent approximately $2 billion on domestic AOUM programs over the past two decades.

“Planned Parenthood is the largest provider of sex education in the country and believes strongly in the rights of young people to the education they need to protect their health,” said Leslie Kantor, PhD, MPH, vice president of education at Planned Parenthood Federation of America and an author on both the position paper and review. “Research confirms that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs withhold critical information from young people and leave them at risk, while a comprehensive review of the literature shows that high quality sex education can make a measurable difference in adolescents’ health and well-being.”


To obtain more information or to speak to an expert, contact Justin Dreyfuss at SAHM headquarters, +1-847-686-2286, jdreyfuss@adolescenthealth.org.

SAHM is a multidisciplinary organization of health professionals who are committed to advancing the health and well-being of adolescents. Through education, research, clinical services and advocacy activities, members of SAHM strive to enhance public and professional awareness of adolescent health issues among families, educators, policy makers, youth-serving organizations, students who are considering a health career, as well as other health professionals. Learn more at www.adolescenthealth.org.