



The public radio show about law and American life

Justice Talking Radio Transcript

Abstinence-Only Education—Air Date: 7/9/07

Federal and state funding programs provide local groups with millions of dollars for "abstinence-only-until-marriage" education programs that are hailed by some as the best way to keep teenagers from having sex and to stop teen pregnancy. But increasingly, state administrators are balking at accepting these dollars, concerned that this is a one-sided approach to sexuality education that fails to give teens medically appropriate information about birth control, prevention of STDs and the option of abortion. Tune in to this edition of Justice Talking as we take an in-depth look at the legality, morality and effectiveness of abstinence-only education.

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MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. I'm Margot Adler. On today's show: abstinence education. Federal funding for states to teach abstinence in schools expired June 30th, though lawmakers may work out a temporary extension of the controversial program. Controversial because the money came with a catch: States that took the funds couldn't promote contraception but were told to teach that sex outside of marriage may be harmful. Opponents of abstinence only programs say this "just say no" approach is ineffective and a waste of money. But abstinence education advocates argue that waiting not only works, it's what parents want. We'll debate this later in the show. But first, while Congress argues over the purse strings for abstinence funding, some states have already cut them. In April, Massachusetts was the latest state to say no thank you to federal money joining more than a half dozen others. Monica Brady-Myerov looks at abstinence education in the Bay State.

ARIEL SPIVEY: Well, I had always known that I wanted to wait.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Eighteen year old Ariel Spivey wears big silver hoop earrings and a jacket that says "adorable" across her chest. Spivey says if she has sex now she could end

up pregnant or with an STD and that would interfere with her dreams of becoming a college professor.

ARIEL SPIVEY: But I didn't understand, like, the whole meaning of, you know, abstinence completely until I took on the program and I was able to learn more about it. And I decided that it was something that I wanted to do for me.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Now she educates her peers about abstinence for Healthy Futures, a Christian nonprofit in Massachusetts that teaches abstinence only in a week-long course in some public schools. Since sex ed is not a required subject in Massachusetts, the school decides whether their students get the no-sex curriculum or a more comprehensive approach. Rebecca Ray, director of Healthy Futures, says the course teaches kids about building healthy relationships while resisting pressure to have sex.

REBECCA RAY: Sexual activity does not help teens. It hurts them. It hurts them physically. It hurts them emotionally.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Ray says refusing federal money for programs such as hers takes away an important lesson for teens. Her program stands to lose 50 percent of its budget.

REBECCA RAY: And we need to figure out what's. How can we get the message through to them that it's better for them to wait? And if it's not working the way that we're doing it right now, let's try other ways. But, um, you can't give up on them. We can't just throw up our hands and say oh well, they're all going to have sex anyway, so let's just, you know, toss some condoms at them and hope that it works.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Sex with condoms is working for 18-year-old Ashley, who didn't want to use her whole name.

ASHLEY: It's not hurting me in my opinion. Like, because I'm willingly, you know, in a very committed relationship and we use protection every time.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Over the past 10 years, the percentage of high school students who report ever having sex has declined. The latest survey shows that more than half of high schoolers in Massachusetts are not having sex. Many groups claim responsibility for the decline, including those that promote safe sex and those that promote no sex until marriage. Angus McQuilken, spokesman for Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts, says it's not opposed to abstinence but a federal study of four abstinence only programs showed clear results.

ANGUS MCQUILKEN: What it found is that these programs simply don't work. They had no impact whatsoever on rates of sexual activity, no impact whatsoever on the age at which sexual activity begins. And that these programs simply are accomplishing nothing. They are a waste of money.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Abstinence advocates say the federal study was based on some of the first programs to teach abstinence and it should not be the final word on all abstinence

programs. Healthy Futures hasn't done long-range studies on whether its programs work. But Ray says after presenting the curriculum to more than 30,000 students she has file cabinets full of letters of appreciation.

REBECCA RAY: These are programs that are voluntary in schools. Schools request it. And it's something that communities want. I mean these communities that we're working in have asked for this program to be here. They like it. They think it's effective. We have letters from teachers that say this is the best sex-education program I've seen in 30 years of teaching.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: And Ray says abstinence is glossed over when it's taught as part of a comprehensive sex ed curriculum. But McQuilken of Planned Parenthood says abstinence programs distort information about the effectiveness of contraception and the risks of abortion.

ANGUS MCQUILKEN: We believe these programs do more harm than good because they leave our young people at risk. They do that by denying young people access to the information they need about contraception, about STD prevention, to allow those young people to stay safe and to stay healthy.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Healthy Futures tells teens they should be abstinent until they are in a lifelong committed relationship. Eighteen-year-old Hector Morales says this just isn't realistic.

HECTOR MORALES: Sex is part of life now. It's, like, being advertised in movies, everything. So you can't get away from sex. It's like, it's like it's always around.

MONICA BRADY-MYEROV: Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick says he believes abstinence should be taught but as part of a comprehensive sex-education program, something the federal grant doesn't allow. For Justice Talking, I'm Monica Brady-Myerov.

MARGOT ADLER: The federal study just mentioned in the previous piece was a long-awaited one. It was authorized by Congress in 1997 and followed over 2,000 elementary and middle school students who participated in abstinence programs. In April, when the results were released, the study was immediately lauded by abstinence-only critics while abstinence supporters played down and even discredited the findings. We decided to take a closer look at the study ourselves and talk with its lead researcher, Christopher Trenholm of Mathematica Policy Research. He says they found no evidence that these abstinence programs affected behavior.

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: So for example, we saw no change between the kids who participated in the programs and their control group in whether they had remained sexually abstinent. We saw no change in the number of sexual partners reported. We saw no change in the age at first intercourse. Um, we also saw no change in the rate of unprotected sex. And that was important for us to report as well, because one of the concerns that some have raised about the programs is that they would increase the risk of unprotected sex by their exclusive focus on

abstinence. So we didn't find any changes there as well. So in some sense I've characterized the story as kind of no good news, no bad news from the standpoint of behavior.

MARGOT ADLER: I was very struck by that finding that these abstinence programs, that they were no less likely not only to have sex but they were no less likely to use condoms or practice safe sex. So when I was thinking about it, it almost seemed as if your study found that nothing really works, that kids get their information from their peers and no programs are going to have much influence. Or am I wrong?

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: I can't really say if you're right or wrong actually. I mean, it's difficult in a study like this to draw sweeping conclusions because, of course, we are only focused on four programs. I do think what it suggests is that these are not easy behaviors to change. These are all programs which again had features that looked promising and certainly met the criteria that the funding wanted to see. And yet in the long run they were able to change some kind of short-run attitudes but in the long run they weren't able to impact behavior. So at a--what it at least suggests to me is just how difficult it is to have impact on teen behavior.

MARGOT ADLER: Some people involved with abstinence-education programs say that the four programs that Mathematica evaluated have already been revised and improved and in any case they're not representative of abstinence education as a whole. How do you respond?

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: It is the case with respect to being representative. We certainly didn't just pick four programs at random from among all the programs that were funded, which I guess in some sense might be more representative. But the programs that we did pick are, if anything, ones that had a good shot of working. So they may not represent all of the programs that were out there, but at the time that we were again to conduct the study, which is back in the late 1990s-early 2000, these were programs which were promising. So maybe not representative, but certainly ones that looked like they had the potential to have impact.

MARGOT ADLER: And how did the programs that you studied respond to your findings?

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: We briefed each of the programs individually before the report was released and gave them an opportunity to share with us their thoughts. And I think their sense was from their own standpoint that they had in many cases made changes over time that they hoped would, um, lead to better outcomes. They also felt that at least in the case of one of the programs, the ability for them to serve kids of maybe older ages might have seen more benefit for them. The one thing that I was really frankly impressed by was the professionalism of each of the programs. These are serious people working very hard for change. They were naturally disappointed by the results but there was no kind of sense of shooting the messenger. You know, we worked with them for a long time and they respected the work that we had done as we respected their work. And they were naturally disappointed but I think that they felt that their mission was still the right mission and that they were working hard at it.

MARGOT ADLER: Another criticism that I heard from some, or that I read that came from some abstinence educators was that many of the students that you studied were between nine and

11 years old, too young to really absorb the abstinence message. And you even say in your report that targeting youth at young ages may not be sufficient.

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: Well, the two points are probably different. The nine to 11 is, I'd say, is probably a mischaracterization. As I said, even in the two upper elementary school programs those kids were on average about 10 and a half when they started, but by the time they were finished, they were say 12, 12 and a half years old when they completed. The middle school program, they were 14 when they started and were 15 or even 16 when they finished the program. So nine to 11 is I think not really an accurate representation of how old the kids were.

MARGOT ADLER: What do you think are the implications of your study for public policy around sex education? What do you think we can really take away from this report?

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: It's difficult for me, wearing a research hat, to say what the takeaway should be for policy very broadly. When you're--you know, it is the case that we're evaluating four programs. It is the case we're evaluating programs which are, were implemented, um, several years back. That doesn't discount the findings and say that they're not important, but at the same time it doesn't mean that this is completely conclusive evidence of how--about every abstinence program or the ones that are around today. So the truth lies somewhere in the middle. This is important information for policymakers to draw on as they make policy decisions. But I think that there is other information that could be thought of. And it's a little bit of a generic comment on my part to make, but certainly continued research is always useful and I think would be useful in this area.

MARGOT ADLER: Christopher Trenholm is a researcher with Mathematica Policy Research, an independent research firm. Thank you very much for coming on our show.

CHRISTOPHER TRENHOLM: Thank you. My pleasure.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up on Justice Talking, we'll hear from a comprehensive sex ed supporter.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We have to look at trying to minimize the harm that people are exposed to when they do have sex. We believe that that is a public health imperative and we just cannot censor the importance and effectiveness of contraception for people when they do have sex.

MARGOT ADLER: And an abstinence-education advocate:

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: There's absolutely no risk involved. We're talking about risk avoidance. We're not talking about risk reduction. And as is true of any public health message, that's where the bar should be set.

MARGOT ADLER: Should schools teach contraception methods or should they instead focus on abstinence until marriage? Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, the public radio show about law and American life. I'm Margot Adler. One-third of teenage girls in the United States still become pregnant before age 20, but teen pregnancy rates have dropped by almost a quarter between 1995 and 2002. And sexual activity has also gone down among teens. So to what can we attribute the good news? Some would say it's due to the rise in abstinence-only education programs. Others would say the only way to further lower these rates is to teach comprehensive sex education.

Here to talk with me about these two approaches are Bill Smith and Valerie Huber. Bill Smith is the director of public policy at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, or SIECUS, an organization that promotes comprehensive sex education. Valerie Huber is executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association, which serves individuals and organizations that teach abstinence education. Welcome both of you to Justice Talking.

VALERIE HUBER: Thanks. It's great to be here.

BILL SMITH: Thanks for having me on.

MARGOT ADLER: There's a spectrum to abstinence education from abstinence only and abstinence plus to comprehensive sex education. Bill, can you define for us how these approaches differ?

BILL SMITH: Wow, that's a wonderful and complex question. What we do know is that abstinence, teaching abstinence actually works. It just doesn't work when you teach it in isolation from other things, including how to use contraception. So one approach says we don't believe that contraception is good for young people and we've got fundamental disagreements with the science about how it works. So we're just going to teach them that abstinence is the only choice and that the only acceptable place for one to be sexually active is within marriage. And then I think it goes to the other sort of position, which is that, again, that abstinence is an incredibly important choice for young people, but we also have to recognize that the vast majority, up in the 90th percentile, of people in this country have sex before they get married. And we want to help them make good responsible decisions, and that includes abstinence, but it also includes when and how to use contraception.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie, what language do you prefer to describe what you do, and how do you think these approaches differ?

VALERIE HUBER: Well, first of all I'd like to say that I oppose abstinence-only education. That terminology reflects misinformation about what the currently funded abstinence education communicates. Abstinence education encompasses a lot of skill-building techniques and they're overwhelmingly supported by parents across the country. When we speak of abstinence education we're talking about relationship skills. We're talking about decisionmaking skills,

self-esteem building. The basic thing is we aren't assuming that kids are going to have sex. We remind students that their value isn't based on whether or not they have sex. And our programs provide the skills so that they can successfully navigate through those difficult times of adolescence. By comparison, comprehensive sex education spends very little time on abstinence and it really is more of a skill-building for contraceptive methods. And it assumes that students are going to have sex and within that format doesn't provide a lot of encouragement to the best health message, which is abstinence.

MARGOT ADLER: And Valerie, what do you see as the ultimate goal behind abstinence? Is it to promote marriage? Is it to prevent the transmission of STDs? Is it to prevent pregnancy? Is it all those things?

VALERIE HUBER: Well, it is probably is all of those things. But we know that when the bar of expectations is raised for any health message, more and more teens are going to reach for it. We can use the example of the anti-smoking campaign. It wasn't very long ago when smoking was an expected behavior and it was glamorous and fashionable. Well, we know that just the opposite is true now. So when we talk about sexual activity among teens we have a lot of confidence in them. We see a brighter future for them as they focus on their goals and their dreams. And the good news is the trends show that more and more teens are choosing abstinence.

MARGOT ADLER: Bill, you said that your group supports abstinence and supports comprehensive sex education. How important is abstinence in education?

BILL SMITH: Thank you for the question. It is incredibly important. And I get a bit flummoxed when I hear constantly that we don't spend enough time in comprehensive programs on abstinence. In fact, I think the comment comes from a really silly way of looking at this, which is that the abstinence-until-marriage promoters have basically done a word count of comprehensive sex education programs to see how many times the word abstinence appears. And that is the judge of how much emphasis is placed on abstinence. And that's just, that's really silly, and it's also just sloppy research. For example, if you look at the website that the Department of Health and Human Services just launched last week called "forparents.gov." This is a website that we've criticized before. We think that there's many, many problems with it. But if you submit that website to the word count test of how many times abstinence is used, guess what? You come up with zero. The word "abstain" is used only sixteen times. There are many, many ways that we need to talk to young people about the importance of abstaining and it doesn't always mean that you use those words. It means using words and concepts like: it's important to wait; it's healthy to wait; it's a good thing to wait--all of those different sort of ways that we say the same thing that escape this sort of rudimentary word count that makes it sound like comprehensive programs do not support abstinence. It's just simply not true.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie, I feel you should get in here because he said that your approach has been pretty much of a silly critique of him.

VALERIE HUBER: Well, the National Abstinence Education Association just completed a study of some of the most popular comprehensive sex ed curricula, and as he mentioned, HHS

also put out a report. And in NAEA's analysis we did not do a word count. We looked at where priority was given and where content was. And let me just give you an example: One of the popular curricula that we reviewed talked about abstinence but here's how it talked about it: Imagine someone has decided to be abstinent. According to your own definition of abstinence, circle the following sexual behaviors you believe a person can engage in and still be abstinent. And here are the choices: Reading erotic literature, cuddling naked, mutual masturbation, showering together, watching porn, talking sexy. Now it doesn't take very long to know that while that may be technically abstinent behavior it will soon transition into something that is not.

MARGOT ADLER: So how do you think contraception should be taught in schools, Valerie?

VALERIE HUBER: Well, actually within the currently funded Congressional guidelines, abstinence education can talk about contraception. We can educate about it but we don't demonstrate it. We don't advocate it and that conversation is always within the primary health message of abstinence.

MARGOT ADLER: Bill, you probably want to respond to that?

BILL SMITH: Sure. Um, well, I appreciate, sort of, what Valerie has said. But the truth is that while the Abstinence Education Association may speak that way, individual programs completely dodge the question of what sort of sexual behaviors constitute abstinence and which do not. It is very, very clear that if a program funded with federal dollars is teaching anything about contraception other than failure rates, they are in the violation of federal law. And I think many of them probably are, because they understand that this is absolute, absolutely ludicrous, that one would be confined to only talking about failure rates, but nonetheless that is what it is. And the way that it manifests itself in programs is, for example, a number of programs that teach that condoms fail 30 percent of the time, which is absolutely not true. The CDC itself has said they're highly, highly effective. And so it's a little disingenuous to say that we teach about contraception. Yes, the abstinence programs, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, teach about contraception. But in the worst, worst possible light that provides no motivation whatsoever for the vast majority of young people who do go on to have sex before marriage to actually use contraception.

MARGOT ADLER: Any why do you advocate a broader approach?

BILL SMITH: Well, you know, we think that sexual behavior itself means that we have to take a wider approach. Listen, again, abstinence is an incredibly great and important choice for young people. It's a great, important choice for adults who decide to do it, too. But again, we have to look at trying to minimize the harm that people are exposed to when they do have sex. We believe that that is a public health imperative and you just cannot censor the importance and effectiveness of contraception for people when they do have sex. So that means that we have to have a wider approach. And it's not just about do you have sex or not have sex. It's also from a comprehensive sex education approach about negotiation skills, about relationship dynamics, about power dynamics, about goal setting, about career aspirations. All of those things which are part and parcel of a young person's everyday life.

MARGOT ADLER: And Valerie, what are the benefits to abstinence?

VALERIE HUBER: There's absolutely no risk involved. We're not talking... we're talking about risk avoidance. We're not talking about risk reduction. And as is true of any public health message, that's where the bar should be set. I actually think that it's harmful to youth if programs do not share the limited effectiveness of condoms. Because what it really presents is that if youth become sexually active, somehow all of those risks will be eliminated by the simple use of latex. Well, you and I both know that that's medically inaccurate. But time and time again in comprehensive sex ed curricula, that is the conclusion drawn, even though it may not be overtly stated.

MARGOT ADLER: I bet both of you would agree that it would be best if kids didn't have sex in high school. Am I right? Bill?

BILL SMITH: Listen, absolutely. It is better for young people to wait to have sex. There is no question about that.

MARGOT ADLER: Yeah, I don't even have to ask Valerie. I'm assuming you would say that. [LAUGHS]

VALERIE HUBER: Absolutely.

MARGOT ADLER: But, Bill, wouldn't it be fair to say that most parents want their kids to be abstinent and that that message, at least for them, trumps being taught how to use a condom in school?

BILL SMITH: Actually, no, it doesn't trump it for them. Parents are perfectly comfortable-- there's some recent polling that's just been done that shows that parents are perfectly comfortable holding two different positions. Number one, yes, I really want my young person to be abstinent as long as I can possibly get them to be. It's a completely understandable position for parents to have. But at the same time, parents are perfectly comfortable in understanding that most young people will have sex before they get married, and that they want their young person to know how to protect themselves from disease, from unintended pregnancy, so that they have better life outcomes. Parents are perfectly comfortable holding those two positions. And the good news is that the research shows us that it's a good place for parents to be, because when you have a strong message about abstinence and you also teach about condoms and contraception, it doesn't increase the age at which young people have sex. It doesn't increase the number of sexual partners that they have. But it does increase condom and contraception use when they do have sex. So this is a win-win-win. Parents get it and they're perfectly comfortable holding both of those positions.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie?

VALERIE HUBER: Well, actually the NAEA recently commissioned Zogby International to do a survey of parents across America, and what we found was that parents supported abstinence education as currently funded by Congress on a 2 to 1 ratio. And actually when we asked where

they wanted the predominant funding to go, their taxpayer dollars, on a 3 to 1 margin, they wanted abstinence education to be funded over comprehensive sex education. Additionally, when we asked them what kind of information they wanted shared regarding condoms, it was exactly within the parameters of what is permitted with current funding. Not demonstration, not advocacy--because they were a little worried that that crossed the line to advocacy of sex. And 80 percent of those parents regardless of their ideological bent supported their children waiting until marriage.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie Huber is executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association. Bill Smith is the director of public policy at SIECUS and we're talking about abstinence and education on Justice Talking. Teen pregnancy rates have fallen in the U.S., but one-third of teenage girls in the United States still become pregnant before age 20. It seems like the programs that both of you are advocating for are falling far short. So why is teen pregnancy such a problem in our country? Bill, you first.

BILL SMITH: Yeah, it's true that we can do much, much better. That's absolutely true. We can actually do a better job with helping young people abstain. Why we're falling short is that we've spent a billion and a half dollars on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. And let me be clear: There is not a single federal funding stream for a comprehensive approach to sexuality education. And that continues to be one of the major reasons why we're not having a dent here.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie, why is teen pregnancy still such a problem?

VALERIE HUBER: Actually, um, when you look at the comparison of priority in American schools, about two-thirds of schools contain education that would most likely fall within the comprehensive sex ed category. Only one-third of schools receive what we would consider abstinence-education programs. So there is a great disparity. I agree that teen pregnancy rates are an issue, but I think teen sexual activity is more of an issue because there are a lot of consequences that come with sexual activity even if you don't get pregnant. And in terms of funding, there are funding streams available for comprehensive sex education that far outweigh those for abstinence education. We believe in local control, and we believe that abstinence education should be one of those decisions that local schools can make, and fortunately there is funding now for abstinence education in the federal budget. It's vital that that continues.

MARGOT ADLER: Does sex education of any kind, including abstinence education, belong in schools? Some would argue that this is the parents' job. I'd like both of you to address that. I'll start with you, Bill.

BILL SMITH: Um, the truth is that every sector of our society should be doing their part to help make sure that young people make good, healthy, and responsible decisions. Parents are, and should be, the primary sexuality educators of their children. We do a lot of work at SIECUS to make sure that parents have the resources they need. But the truth is that a lot of young people don't grow up in families or have parents that are comfortable talking about these things with their children. So to that extent, schools are absolutely an essential part of helping young people make responsible decisions whether that's to be abstinent or to use contraception when they do have sex. And most importantly, parents understand that schools are their partners in this. So I

think the discussion about whether or not sex ed should be in schools is just about at an end because most parents, most Americans, believe that it's a--that schools serve a vital role here.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie, do you agree?

VALERIE HUBER: I do agree. And I think, as Bill said, that parents should be the primary sex educators of their children. And abstinence education programs take that role very, very seriously. And what we want to do is help equip parents to do a better job, open up those lines of communication so that teens feel more comfortable communicating with parents, and parents feel more comfortable sharing the best health message with those children. And so we try to do that by providing valuable and very easily usable resources.

MARGOT ADLER: Valerie Huber is executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association. Bill Smith is the director of public policy at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, or SIECUS. Thank you both for coming on our show.

VALERIE HUBER: Thank you so much.

BILL SMITH: Thank you Margot.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up on Justice Talking we'll hear from a man who left a Fortune 500 company to start an abstinence program in Texas. And the author of a new book about sex and religion and the lives of teens shares his surprising findings about evangelical teens. The likelihood that they've lost their virginity is:

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Higher than Catholics, higher than mainline Protestants, higher than Jews, higher than Mormons, but a little bit lower than black Protestants and kids who say they have no religious affiliation.

MARGOT ADLER: Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, where we make the connection between law and American life. I'm Margot Adler. We're talking today about abstinence-only education. Later in the show we'll hear from some teenagers who tell us when they think it's the right time to have sex. But first we wanted to talk with someone who runs an abstinence program. Dan Bailey is the founder and executive director of Just Say YES – Youth Equipped to Succeed, a not-for-profit abstinence program headquartered in Dallas, Texas. I asked him if he calls what they do at Just Say YES abstinence-only education.

DAN BAILEY: You know, that term has so many different interpretations. We really look at our program as abstinence is part of it but it's really positive youth development. So we're

covering all the inter-related risk behaviors, for instance drugs, alcohol, tobacco, bullying, and we do have an emphasis on teen sexual activity, with a focus on abstinence.

MARGOT ADLER: What is the goal of abstinence education?

DAN BAILEY: You know, we state the goal of abstinence until marriage and, Margot, that is the ideal goal. And we know that, you know, the majority of the students today are not going to make that goal. So part of our goal is to get students to delay sexual activity. The studies show that the number one risk of getting an STD is multiple partners. And there's also direct correlation the younger a student starts becoming sexually active, the more sexual partners they'll have throughout their lifetime. So even if we can get them to delay sexual activity until after high school or up into their twenties, that's an intermediate goal. We think the best health and safety message is to delay sexual activity until you're in a long-term committed relationship, which in our society is typically marriage.

MARGOT ADLER: Do you think there's anything wrong with teaching abstinence alongside contraception methods?

DAN BAILEY: I look at the classroom. And we do classrooms. We do assemblies. We do a curriculum. And I really divide the students into three groups. One is students that have already been sexually active. Another group on the other extreme are students that are making good choices that, you know, they're the ones that probably will not get involved sexually until later in life. And then you've got kind of this mushy or fuzzy middle.

MARGOT ADLER: And you separate this when you teach? You separate these groups?

DAN BAILEY: Well, we mentally separate it. So in other words, as we're speaking, we're speaking to each of those groups. We're like a voice in the wilderness saying to all three of these groups: Hey, if you've been sexually active, consider starting over, a fresh start today. If you're in the middle, kind of on the fence, here are the reasons you may want to lean towards waiting. And those that are waiting, hey, good choice; we're there to support you. And they literally--the ones that are committed to waiting--they come up to our speakers afterwards and go, man, finally someone's telling, you know, speaking my language. Thanks for encouraging me. And, you know, my friends are going to look at me totally different today because they get it; they see why I'm waiting.

MARGOT ADLER: Are kids who are participating in your program getting other information about contraception, STDs, for example, in health class?

DAN BAILEY: Well, I think it depends on the state that you're in. Some states require more education on the STDs and birth control. Each state kind of has their own parameters. But what I see is students, you know, the students we talk to, they know about condoms. They're involved whether they're watching MTV or whether it's the magazines they're reading. My daughter just turned 20 and she had taken for a lot of years Seventeen Magazine. If you're reading these magazines, if you're watching MTV, trust me, you know about birth control. You know about the choices out there. What they're not hearing, though, is the risk side. In other words, they're

not hearing the failure rates. They're not hearing, you know, that even the pill is not a 100 percent effective. We have a doctor we work with and she tells us all the time that girls come in there that have said I took the pill every day yet I'm pregnant. What happened? And she said, did no one tell you that's not 100 percent effective? So we educate them that, hey, you're at risk. You know, sexual activity is a high risk choice and there's consequences way beyond what you're able to handle at your age.

MARGOT ADLER: Dan Bailey is the founder and executive director of Just Say YES – Youth Equipped to Succeed, a not-for-profit abstinence program. Thank you for talking with me today.

DAN BAILEY: Margot, it's been great talking to you as well.

MARGOT ADLER: Just Say YES is not religiously affiliated, but many abstinence programs around the country are connected with a church or a religious denomination. And abstinence-until-marriage is preached by many religions. So what affect does religion have on teens' attitudes and behavior when it comes to sex? My next guest looked into that question. Mark Regnerus is the author of "Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers." He's also an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Texas. Welcome to Justice Talking.

MARK REGNERUS: Thanks Margot. It's good to be here.

MARGOT ADLER: How does religion measure against other factors like parental influence or peer pressure that might affect teen's sexual behavior?

MARK REGNERUS: Uh, that's not an easy question to answer, because religion is often at work in those other kinds of factors as well. If you're looking at a direct influence of religion it may not compare quite exactly to peer pressures, um, parental monitoring, some personality factors like how clanful youth are, but if you go back a few steps in time, religion is often at work in why parents want to monitor why kids develop certain kinds of friends and not other kinds of friends. So directly it's not always the most powerful influence but indirectly it touches a lot of things.

MARGOT ADLER: Your book reveals some surprising findings about evangelical teens and sex. First, how do they describe the role of sex in their lives?

MARK REGNERUS: Well, that's curious because it--we know that they're not talked to nearly so much as non-religious kids, and that may be a function of their parents perceiving that they're less at risk of engaging in sexual behavior during the teen years. We know that evangelical kids tend to delay on average until about their 16th or 17th year. Parents often consider their kids at lower risk. And also what you wind up with with evangelical kids is they aren't anticipating getting sexually involved. Their parents haven't talked to them a great deal about it. And interestingly enough, their churches aren't saying a whole lot about it except don't have sex before you get married. And so what you have is fairly underdeveloped sexual ethics,

surprisingly, despite all the hubbub we hear about sex and religion and teenagers and evangelicals, they don't really know much about it. They don't really know what to anticipate. And they're often caught off guard by sexual feelings and sexual situations.

MARGOT ADLER: But one of the things that I noticed that you say in your book is that the culture impinges on all American kids, including religious ones.

MARK REGNERUS: Right. Evangelicals are uniquely sort of conservative about sex in attitudes, but as the book talks about, they're fairly average, middle-of-the-road in terms of age at first sex and sort of subsequent sexual behaviors. And one of the key reasons I find to explain that is that they are unique in America in terms of the cultural collision. I call it like a thunderstorm. The two fronts, the sort of the old-world front of traditional religion, Christianity and its expectations, it's sort of familism, and this new front which every kid experiences, which is the saturation by modern media: they alone almost are battling this. I mean battle is a motif word that they use a lot. I mean it's a battle out there with modern media scripts, and so it's a storm. And they get caught up in the storm and what happens is a lot of them lose their virginity earlier than kids who aren't even in that storm, kids who are actually more permissive than them in attitude.

MARGOT ADLER: What did you find out when it came to their actual sexual behavior?

MARK REGNERUS: Actual sexual behavior, um, a cross-section of adolescents--about a third of them--have already had sexual intercourse. Higher than Catholics, higher than mainline Protestants, higher than Jews, higher than Mormons, but a little bit lower than black Protestants and kids who say they have no religious affiliation. So they're kind of middle-of-the-road, a little bit leaning towards the more-likely-to-have-had-sex than other kids.

MARGOT ADLER: What do you think the conclusions in your book tell us about how we should go about teaching sex education in the schools today?

MARK REGNERUS: What I think the take-home message for education from this book is is that we have really got to get on the ball here in terms of how kids learn.

MARGOT ADLER: And what do you suggest to parents, particularly religious parents?

MARK REGNERUS: Right.

MARGOT ADLER: How should they reconcile their desire for their kids to wait until marriage with these realities that you're talking about, about being teenagers today?

MARK REGNERUS: I complain about parents who tend to assume kids know everything about the mechanics of sex and say, 'oh my job is to tell them not to do it,' I think parents overestimate how much their kids know.

MARGOT ADLER: That was Mark Regnerus, author of "Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers."

You can hear more of my conversation with Mark, including his thoughts on how the internet has changed the way we should think about educating our kids about sex. Just go to our website, justicetalking.org.

MARGOT ADLER: Erica Granados is a peer educator in a sex-education program at the Latin American Youth Center in Washington, D.C. Erica interviewed youth from her program and from around D.C. to hear their experiences and opinions about sex.

ERICA GRANADOS: S-E-X: We watch it on TV, hear it on the radio, see it in the magazines, and for all my fellow teens, you can't deny that we talk about it all the time. What do you think the right age is to have sex?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Sixteen, 17, most of my friends have. About, yeah, about that age.

ERICA GRANADOS: Do you think that's the right age you should be having sex?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I mean, I feel like you should wait till marriage, but that's not really what's happening nowadays.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Sex should be really shared between two people. Not like between you and your boyfriend this week, you and your next boyfriend, you and the boyfriend after that. But I'm not going to like put in their faces, be like what you're doing is wrong. Like, if you want to go, go ahead. And if you think it's your time, go ahead.

ERICA GRANADOS: See, what adults don't understand is that it's embedded in our daily dialog. We talk about sex probably as many times as we talk about food. And that's a lot. [LAUGHS]

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Because your friends ain't teaching you how to not--how to use a condom.

ERICA GRANADOS: They tell you that it's sex, but they don't tell you to use a condom.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Or the consequences of having sex.

ERICA GRANADOS: Right. Exactly.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: So you got a lot of pressure on you. My name is Travis but everybody call me Trey. I didn't use a condom when I had sex with her, and I got--what was it?--gonorrhea. I knew my cousin: He had gonorrhea for six years and he just didn't want to tell nobody. So like the next week I went and got checked. They told me I had gonorrhea because I was peeing and burning. They got that up out of me, man, they stuck that Q-tip. That's no joke.

But then it was sweet after that. I used condoms every day of my life because I do not want to catch AIDS.

ERICA GRANADOS: Lesson learned.

TRAVIS: Lesson learned! That's why I just say it's not a bad thing--I mean it is a bad thing that I learned at a young age. Like, you need a mistake to learn from.

ERICA GRANADOS: You know what? He's right. Why are we raised by our mistakes? Why do I have to raise myself? Why do we have to grow up? So about you personally, your first time? Did it just happen? Were you like, now I'm ready, I want to do it with this girl?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Well, I was 10 and she was 13. And, um, she was like my next-door neighbor. So I went up to her and I talked to her, whatever. I ain't even know she was 13. I thought she was my age because she looked young. But she had all the cleavage and all that.

ERICA GRANADOS: Cleavage and all that! I met Demar at his high school. I recruited him for a sex-ed program that I worked with in Washington, D.C. at the Latin American Youth Center.

DEMAR: So, um, after that she asked me, was I a virgin? I said, what's that? And she was like, it's when you don't have sex. I said, ooh sex. And she was like, yeah. She said, so you ain't never seen nothing like that? I was like, no.

ERICA GRANADOS: You were 10. I mean, did you know? I mean, did you know anything about sex?

DEMAR: Oh, I didn't know nothing about sex. I just seen all the videos. They just be dancing and I thought that was some moves. [LAUGHS] So I didn't really know.

ERICA GRANADOS: Yes, Demar had sex. And, yes, he was 10. Man. I remember playing double dutch with my friends out on the street, eating ice cream on the porch on a hot summer day. What happened to those times? Seems like I traded double dutch for sex. Man, I didn't want that. I liked playing double dutch!

DEMAR: I think my mama should have told me about the birds and the bees before, but she didn't. She was waiting till the right time or whatever.

ERICA GRANADOS: Well, I don't think she expected her 10-year-old to go and have--

DEMAR: She don't. She didn't. She don't even know. Well, she know that I'm doing it now because I told her.

ERICA GRANADOS: So what did your mom or what does your mom tell you about sex?

DEMAR: Well, she asked me, am I having sex? I tell her nah, or she says, there's a lot of diseases out there. I say, I know. That's why I go to this program. And I knew it before. She was like, okay, well just stay safe and all that good stuff.

ERICA GRANADOS: Wait till you're married. It should be with someone you love. You'll know when you're ready. We're trying to figure out if any of this really makes sense. Half the time we contradict ourselves, what we're thinking and saying, because we're learning to think for ourselves. The reality is that we deal with so much. It's amazing that we're not worse off. It seems like my generation is raised by luck, by what happens to happen.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: My grandmother was abusive, drunk. All her kids acted the same way except for my aunt. She said, I'm not going to be like that. You know, so I said I'm making the same decision. I'm not going to be like my mother and just let my kids roam the street anytime of night, spending the night without calling, not giving a curfew to me, not giving me no consequences for nothing.

ERICA GRANADOS: What are you going to tell your daughter about sex?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Ah, I don't know. That's the hardest part a father has, I'm telling you, because I can't tell her nothing about a girl part of sex. Like, well I can tell her the safe part of sex: make sure you use a condom. If you don't, do not have sex with them. But in this generation, who listens to their parents?

ERICA GRANADOS: Exactly. [MUSIC] If we, as a generation, are going to see sex as something more than just something to do, something that everyone does, we need to spend our time figuring out how to get more attention to the needs that no one sees.

MARGOT ADLER: Erica Granados is a youth radio reporter with the Latin American Youth Center in Washington, D.C. She worked with independent producer Shea Shackelford.

Do you think kids should be taught in school that they should wait to have sex until marriage? Do you think it's a message that can be taught in school? Do you think kids should be taught about contraception and sexually transmitted infections? Weigh in with your thoughts on our website, justicetalking.org.

While there, post on our message boards, learn more about our guests, and sign up for our free podcasts. And check out our blog, where many of the nation's leading commentators give their views on law and American life. Thanks for listening. I hope you'll tune in next week. I'm Margot Adler.
